USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELANA JOHNSON

# WRITING AND LAUNCHING A BESTSELLER

INDIE INSPIRATION VOLUME FOUR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELANA JOHNSON

# WRITING AND LAUNCHING A BESTSELLER

INDIE INSPIRATION VOLUME FOUR

# WRITING AND LAUNCHING A BESTSELLER

INDIE INSPIRATION FOR SELF-PUBLISHERS, BOOK 4

ELANA M JOHNSON

# CONTENTS


About Elana Johnson and This Book
Before You Write
Reader expectations for the genre
Series
Goals for the Book/Series
I. The Actual Writing of a Bestseller
    Writing the Book
    One: Craft
    Two: Characters
    Three: Consistency
    Four: Capability

The Packaging of a Bestseller
If You Hate Money, Read This
II. The Launch Tiers
    Hard, Medium, and Soft Launches
    Newsletters
    Content Marketing
    Paid Advertising

III. Launching Your Bestseller
    Pre-launch Checklist
    Pre-launch in Tiers
    Wide Launches
    Launch Plan Resources
    The Hard Launch
    The Medium Launch
    The Soft Launch
    Budgeting for Your Launch
    Sample Launch Plans for a Series
    Post-Launch

The End of The Road
Resources

About Elana

## ABOUT ELANA JOHNSON AND THIS BOOK

Hello again, hello! I think most of you maybe know who I am by now. This isn't the first Indie Inspiration book I've written, though it may be the first one you've read. Or are reading. Whatever. The first one you've picked up.

I'm Elana Johnson, for those of you who don't know. The one with the weird hair in a woefully outdated profile picture. LOL. It's just such a great picture that I can't change it. I don't have anything even remotely close to that picture, as I retired to become a full-time writer soon after that pic, and I barely put on real clothes to work most days.

Most of my "outfits" consist of my workout leggings with an oversized T-shirt from one of the places I've visited in the past five years, both paired with one of my two dozen visors. I adore visors with my whole soul, but that is information no one needs to know. And no one wants to see my above attire—fresh with a sweaty face from the treadmill—on an author photo, trust me!

I started writing in 2007, and I entered the marketplace in 2011 with a traditionally published young adult dystopian novel. I became disenfranchised from trad-pub pretty dang fast, and by 2014, I was self-publishing a lot of my "trunk novels" from my hard drive that my agents didn't want or couldn't sell.

By 2015, I had moved to a different genre and started a new pen name for that genre. She makes a large portion of my money now, as I did some things very right with her that I haven't done right with other names or endeavors.

I want to pause right here and say there are plenty of ways to achieve success. There is not a single path to any income level, any destination, or any goal you want to achieve. I don't believe there are any must-dos in self-publishing, though there are a few select things I do with every name I start, because I've consistently seen those things work in my favor to sell more books.

I also want to make it clear that the writing of a book and the publishing of that book are two separate things in my head. I believe there is one absolute in writing—write a good book. A really good one if you can. A super-duper, the-best-book-ever one if you can manage it. We'll talk more about this in a future chapter.

That book is the most important thing in your arsenal, so don't skip this step. Skip making a website or setting up a reader group on Facebook. Skip reading every piece of advice you can get your hands on. Skip the next episode of a marketing podcast. Skip that next bite of cheesecake!

But do not skip writing an amazing, unputdownable book.

Lastly, this book is going to contain a few metaphors, first and foremost, fishing. No, I don't particularly like fishing. I can't remember the last time I went. In fact, my dad told me when I was oh, probably ten or eleven that the next fish I caught, I'd have to scale and gut it myself. So I never went fishing again.

This might be how you feel about writing your next book. *Why bother? It's such a chore—or it's something that I don't enjoy or won't think I'll enjoy, so I just won't do it.*

You might feel like that about advertising. Perhaps your ads in the past haven't been as stellar of an experience as you would like. So you just

won’t do them anymore.

Maybe your last launch was akin to scaling and gutting yourself, and no one needs that in their life. *So why bother? Just don’t do it. Nothing matters anyway.*

Right?

Does any of that sound familiar at all?

I have this irrational hour in my life every so often too. My mind takes over and runs through all of the things that have gone wrong in my writing career—from the seriously short books I wrote most of 2018 and 2019, thinking that more, more, more releases would level me up, to the less than stellar launches that seem to plague me no matter how good I feel about the series, how many amazing reviews I get, or whatever else that should tell me the opposite.

Sometimes, our human minds want to focus on the negative so badly, and when my brain does that, I call it my “irrational hour,” and I try to get myself out of it. I remind myself that some of my launches have gone really well. That every mistake I’ve made so far is a learning step—a way for me to fail forward—and that I don’t know what I don’t know. So “mistakes” are only known in hindsight.

That’s all okay. If you’ve felt like this, you’re not alone, and you’re okay too. There is always right now to take another step, and perhaps it’ll be in the direction you want to move in. If it isn’t, rest assured that all will not be lost. I’m not sure there’s anything you can do that you can’t undo in Indie Publishing, and I think that’s a beautiful thing. It allows us to fix things our Past Selves didn’t know, and rely on our Future Selves to make wiser decisions than where we are now.

I hope to do that with this book too—help you wherever you are right now to make wiser decisions today than you made yesterday, or than you made before reading this book.

So back to the fishing…I want you to think about all the things you need to go fishing. There's equipment you need—a boat, a pole, fishing line, a hook, clothing (sometimes this one is really important. The type of fishing matters—ice fishing? You don't just show up with one of those fly jackets with all the lures tied to it. You need outdoor gear for that), tackle box, worms or other bait, a fishing license for the area you want to fish in, and more (I'm sure. Remember how I haven't actually been fishing in a while?).

Besides just "the stuff" you need to get the job done, you need knowledge of the area where you'll be tossing your line. Maybe you'll hire an expert to get you into the lake and then back out of the wilderness safely. Maybe you'll buy a guidebook that lists the type of fish that live in that river, pond, stream, lake, or ocean.

Suffice it to say, this fishing thing has gotten complicated really fast. Right? Becoming an Indie Author is kind of like that too. There's the writing of the book, and that can require everything from waders to the right kind of snacks that keep you going when you're up against a deadline. There's the packaging of the book, which is like knowing what kind of fish like which kind of bait and then arming yourself with precisely what they like. And there's the publishing and marketing of that book, which has multiple "experts," as well as "guidebooks" and those willing to lead you to the lake and get you back out safely.

They can't, however, throw in the line for you. They can't fish for you. They can't do the writing, the packaging, the publishing, and the marketing for you. They don't go to the store and buy the fancy vest, the long johns to keep you warm, the waterproof boots, the ice saw, or the bait.

You need to know what you need to fish in the pond you're trying to fish in.

That's what this book aims to provide for you.

I've spent time and words in a couple of other books to help you with marketing strategies and systems (Writing and Releasing Rapidly, as well as Writing and Marketing Systems), as well as productivity increases and writing systems (again, Writing and Releasing Rapidly, as well as Writing and Marketing Systems), and one other volume to help you craft really amazing cover copy for your product.

I'm not going to be covering those in great detail in this book.

This book is about 1. Writing a Bestseller, and then 2. Launching that Bestseller.

I will talk about what I think authors should stop and think about before they write, while they're writing, how they package their products, and then how to launch those products into an ever-increasingly crowded marketplace.

That's Writing and Launching a Bestseller.

I hope you're ready to begin! I know I am, so let's jump in.

## BEFORE YOU WRITE

Before you start writing your next bestseller, whether you're an author who needs an outline, a loose plot, or nothing at all, I think it's worth at least a "think session" or two about a few things.

I think most of us are familiar with the term "write to market," and that means you need to do a few things before you start penning your next bestseller—at least if you want it to become a bestseller.

By the way, if you haven't heard of writing to market, it's basically just writing a book that has a high probability of selling well, either because of the tropes contained therein, because of the genre, or because of the packaging. If you don't take any time whatsoever to learn these before you begin writing your next bestseller, you might get lucky and still make a million dollars anyway.

But the odds won't be in your favor. Sometimes we want to "twist" the market, thinking that will make us stand out in a crowded marketplace. Sometimes we want to "put our own spin" on a trope or a super-popular genre, thinking that readers want unique.

Well, I'm here to tell you…they don't. They want a good story, well-written. They want characters that are larger than life while remaining true to life. They want the meet cute to happen precisely when it should, and

then that first kiss, and so on. Formulas work for a reason, as do tropes, genres, and themes.

They work because they're ***familiar***. It makes the reader feel like they're going to sink into their favorite chair, the perfect cup of tea beside them, their cat curled up on their lap, and go on an amazing experience, because they've done it before.

The twist you want to put in? Yanks them out of that familiarity. Spills all that tea. Upsets the cat.

The spinned genre? Readers: *This isn't familiar… I don't like this… Puts book down… Backs away slowly…*

Don't do it.

Readers want familiar, *and* what I like to call fresh.

The Double-F—that's how you get a lot of readers into your book and how you keep them coming back for more.

You give them exactly what they want and have read before (the familiar), and then you make it fresh.

I can hear the whining, er questioning, right now.

*But Elana, how? How do I make it fresh if I can't twist and spin and remodel and flip things on their heads?*

*How?*

*For the love of bacon maple doughnuts, how?*

Your first step toward bestseller-dom is to study the market. You might think you can skip this step, but you can't. Well, that's not true. You certainly can. But then you might be spending the next several months writing and editing, proofing and packaging, a book that won't make you any money.

That's totally great if you A. hate money, or B. one of your goals isn't to make money. I'm going to venture a guess that if you've picked up this book, one of your goals is to make money. And to do that, you need to do a

few things before you start writing your next bestseller in order to give yourself the best chance of landing on that list.

## READER EXPECTATIONS FOR THE GENRE

You need to know what readers already consuming books in the genre you want to enter expect. What do they like? What do they not like? What are they growing weary of? What do they wish there was more of? What kinds of characters do they expect to see? What kind of characters are under-represented? What kind of plots are in the bestsellers?

If you can meet the expectations of the genre, you're well on your way to getting that bestseller status. Writing and publishing a really good book —a bestseller—takes a lot of time and effort. And not just in penning the words on the page and then making them shine.

It takes time, work, and energy *before* you even start penning the words on the page. My best advice? Read.

Read the books in your genre that are selling well. Keep a notebook near you as you do and write down the things you see in all the books. When I had the opportunity to write for Hallmark, one of the very first things I did was buy the Hallmark Channel on my Roku TV.

Then, I dug through my stationary closet (come on, you have one too) and got out a really cute notebook. I popped my favorite popcorn and put on way too much salt so no one else would eat it (evil trick—sorry family). I

settled onto the couch, and I started watching every Hallmark movie that came on.

I was dedicated—I thought I'd watch 15 or 20 and then I'd have this grand understanding of what Hallmark wanted in their stories. Sure, I'd watched Hallmark movies before. I'd have to be sort of undead if I hadn't. Right? Sometimes you watch one and don't even know it. LOL.

Anyway, it didn't take 15 or 20 to get the gist. It took maybe 3. Perhaps 4 if I'm being generous. Then, I just started reading the descriptions for the movies, and I could add checkmarks to the things I saw in every single movie.

And I knew what types of stories Hallmark wanted. Now, they never did buy a book from me, but when they turned down one of my books because they, and I quote, "didn't know how to make a female mechanic cute," I decided I didn't need Hallmark to find my own success.

You might think I immediately wrote my mechanic Christmas romance and shoved it in their face.

I wanted to, but well, I didn't.

In fact, I had all those covers for that series, and it was going to be the next series I wrote, but after that rejection, I decided to do something different first. Rejection hurts, even those of us who've been told no many, many times.

And friends, readers who won't buy your books? That's a rejection. A silent one, but one that cuts deep. If you need to take some time to heal those wounds, do it. You want to be the healthiest you can be when you pen your next bestseller, and that usually doesn't happen from a place of turmoil and desperation.

Take that time as you're healing from silent reader rejection to read the bestsellers. Make your lists. Note what types of covers they're using. Read their blurbs several times. Figure out the patterns they're using, the

metadata words they're using in their titles and subtitles and series titles, and which tropes or trends seem to be selling the best.

I wrote two more series, both of which were extremely well received by readers, before I went back to my non-cute mechanic. At the time, I wasn't sure why people started clamoring over those series, but in the past couple of years since, I've learned a lot about different things, and I think I can pinpoint what I did right in those books.

Armed with that information—and all the confidence I needed to push aside the comments from Hallmark, I got writing my female mechanic book. Not only was she super-cute in her coveralls and grease on her face, she was drop-dead gorgeous *to the hero*, and he'd been crushing on her for a couple of years. Take that, Hallmark. Haha!

I will pause right here and say—this book, which is the first book in my Shiloh Ridge Ranch series—did not launch out of the gate like gangbusters. It was, in fact, quite the disappointment compared to the two previous series.

I wasn't sure why—I thought I'd seized onto a couple of things (namely cowboy billionaires—two huge sub-genres of romance—and a family of brothers, which both of my previous series had been)—that would sell my books as well as the previous 12 that had come out.

But that first book sort of burst from the gate like an over-eager racehorse, tired itself out by the second turn, and finished somewhere near the back of the pack.

Horse racing metaphor! Yes! I told you there'd be metaphors. I didn't see that one coming, but it's making me smile.

Anyway, I didn't give up with the first book. I never do. By the time Book 1 comes out, I usually have 2 and 3 written. I keep going, for the most part, because I also know that I don't have to bring every reader who will ever read my book into the book the day, week, or month it comes out.

Digital books have no shelf-life. None. A book published in 2014 or 2022 has the same value to someone who's never read it. And it's my belief after spending over a million dollars in advertising over the past couple of years, that there's *always* going to be someone who hasn't read your books.

Always.

It's a lifelong product, which is why it's best if you can get it right the first time—and that means doing some work on the front end of drafting or even outlining.

So read the bestsellers.

And then… Then read the reviews. Read the 5-star reviews and make a list of the things the readers of that book liked.

Read the 1-star reviews and make a list of the things the readers of that same book did not like.

Do that for 5 or 6 books, and I'm fairly certain that you'll see patterns emerging in what readers for that genre like—and what they don't.

If you're feeling plucky, read the 3-star reviews too. Those people are on the fence—and you don't want any fence-sitters. You want people tapping as fast as they can to turn the page on their Kindle to get to the end of your book. You want super-fans, and those come from the 5-starrers.

But, if you need some extra time to heal, read the 3-star reviews too. See what they're saying. Oh, and 1-star reviews can be good too. How? If they're saying things like, *I really hated this book, but I had to see how it ended,* that's *good*.

That means the author is a good enough storyteller to have created story questions that must be answered before people can walk away from the book. I'll take that 1-star review any day of the week.

That's your first assignment! Oh, you didn't think there would be homework? Have you read one of my books? #wink

**Homework:**

1. Read the top 5 bestsellers in your genre or sub-genre. Make a list of what's common in all of them.

2. Take note of the covers. Perhaps saving them all in a folder and opening them at the same time to see what they have in common would be helpful. Colors? Font style? Objects? People? Placement of objects or people? Make a quick list of cover characteristics that are selling.

3. Read the 5-star reviews for those books, as well as the 1-star reviews. Make a list of what people liked and what they didn't like.

Bonus Points: Read the 3-star reviews to find out what those fence-sitters are saying. Note anything that jumps out at you or that you see more than once.

4. Review what you've learned. The list you made while reading will show you the formula of that sub-genre. The reviews tell you what readers expect to find and love, and what they didn't like so much, which is usually what they didn't expect to find in that type of book. Go over the blurbs and note what kind of words they're using in titles, subtitles, series titles, and the blurb itself. Make a list of words that could be search terms.

Once you've done this, you should have a fairly complete picture of what's selling in your sub-genre right now. And if you can make your book look like and sound like that…you can probably launch your book all the way to bestseller status.

**NOTE:** Your job is *not* to copy someone else's hard work. I have Feelings about this, as one who's had direct lines taken from my blurbs and used as if that author had come up with them solo. Don't use someone else's subtitle or series name. Don't use their name either, for crying out loud. Yes, I had someone take part of my name and part of another bestselling

author's name and make their name. That's…I don't even have words for what that is.

I'm advising against doing that. There's a very big difference between copying and emulating. Your job is to find the familiar—and make it fresh. Not just take and copy what's already working.

This step is all about *familiarizing* yourself with what readers expect from the book you want to write for them.

Now the real work begins. Now, you need to **make the familiar seem fresh**.

# SERIES

Oh, you thought I was going to jump right into the freshness pool? Nope. *insert evil laugh here*

It's coming, my pretties. It really is, just not in this section. But we will talk about all that delicious freshness at the end of this part, I promise.

First, let's talk series.

I advocate for series, because I think they do better than standalone novels. They give readers more to consume without any resistance. Or very, very little. This certainly varies by genre, but mysteries, romances, thrillers, science fiction and fantasy, women's fiction, romantic comedies, and dozens of other sub-genres have series in them, and they work for a reason.

Think of it like this—you watch one of the Jason Bourne movies, and you love it. What do you immediately want more of?

That amazing Jason Bourne. Don't lie to me! You don't go, *Oh, no thank you, Matt Damon. Yes, of course I adored your movie, but I think I'll watch a silent Charlie Chaplin flick next.*

Nope. We want the next Jason Bourne movie. And the next. And the next.

And after a few of them have been delivered to us that we've highly enjoyed, with phenomenal acting and great premises that are delivered

upon, we start to trust the entire franchise of Jason Bourne.

We know that every movie that comes from this production studio with his name in it is for us. We'll love it. It's familiar…but fresh.

That's what sequels and then series are.

They're familiar but fresh to a T. They are the epitome of the concept.

This is what you want to give to the readers coming into your brand. You deliver a good book the first time, and it leads directly to another? The reader moves on, happily consuming their books and tea while ignoring the dishes, the children, and all that cat hair accumulating on their pajama pants.

After a few books with fantastic writing, clever characters, and fresh plots that deliver exactly what the reader wants…they trust you as a storyteller. They will now buy anything with your name on it, because they know you deliver the type of reading experience they want.

Every time.

You have to do it every time. And that's a dang hard thing to do for authors. But that's the goal. That's how we build brands that can continue to grow and expand with multiple entry points to them—one for each new series we write—because each book is just as amazing of an experience for the reader as the last.

So no matter how the reader learns of you, after a few books where you deliver precisely what they want, they'll read your whole backlist.

That's how you stretch your advertising dollar really, really far.

I have digressed tragically from the point of this section, and that's series. I mean, maybe I'm sort of on track? If you can write in a series, it's much, much easier to get people to keep reading, which can convert them to whole-brand fans faster than standalones. That's where I was driving to with all of the above. I maybe took a couple of extra turns, but we still got there.

Develop your ideas into a series before writing the first book. I do this with a spreadsheet, and I utilize the family unit to do it. Most of my series are now family-based (new as of 2019), and they do far better than my pre-2019 series, which were loosely connected by a place (usually a ranch or a resort).

So I start with a "skinny family" where none of the siblings are married. Then one of them finds their One True Love, and that snowballs through the whole family until they've each found their happily-ever-after in book form. This type of series has helped me grow my brand and my bottom line with very little resistance from book to book.

You definitely can do other things. Packs of wolf-shifters. College roommates. Best friends who meet every summer. Etc.

And don't be afraid for the series to grow legs of its own and surprise you.

In fact, I started a women's fiction series with five best friends who reunite thirty years after their high school graduation under poor circumstances. When I started the series, I thought there would be five books.

Then I added a character in Book 3 who really needed her own book. Then another. Then another. There are now 8 books, and I might stop there. I might not.

That "non-cute" mechanic? That series was going to be 9 books; it ended up 11, and that mechanic becomes a mom and then the matriarch of the whole ranch. She tirelessly takes care of everyone on the ranch, bringing them cupcakes on their birthdays and making sure they all have somewhere to spend Christmas, even if it's with her and her family. No one on that ranch can ever, *ever* think that Sammy doesn't know them and love them and want them there.

I took her from "non-cute female mechanic" to the biggest champion of the cowboys, cowgirls, her children, her husband, and all of her in-laws on

the ranch. And there are a lot of them. She is the greatest heroine of the series, and she does it all being perfectly…herself, cute or not.

That is what readers want. They want larger than life people they can also relate to. Who hasn't felt overlooked? Who hasn't felt non-cute? Who hasn't wanted to make a difference? Who hasn't felt the weight of the world —or in Sammy's case, the two-ton truck above her she desperately has to fix before five p.m.? Who hasn't wanted to be rescued from a hard life by a handsome cowboy billionaire?

Wait. That last one might just be me… LOL.

And really, in the end, Sammy wasn't rescued by her hero. She ***became the hero*** of her own life, and everyone wants to think they can do that too.

That's why that book went on to sell really well after I got a few more of them out in the series. The *series potential of that family and ranch* actually helped me sell Book 1 after it's sort of limping launch.

Okay, enough about me and my families and blah blah. Time for homework!

**Homework:**

1. Figure out a way to develop your book idea into a series. Tying them all to the same place is acceptable, though perhaps not the strongest. My favorite way is by creating a group that functions the way a family does. They don't have to be related to feel the need to drop everything and do anything for the other people in that group.

When my first book came out in 2011 with Simon & Schuster, I found myself in the middle of 4 other women, and the 5 of us called ourselves the Baconistas. We all launched our debut that year, all with trad-pubs, and we emailed constantly. I mean, *constantly*.

They were my absolute best friends.

That's the type of unit that makes a good series. See if you can create something like that.

However you plan, write all of these people down. Give them names and occupations and *life*. Then you can reference them in early books and get people excited for the later ones still to come.

2. Develop your place. Whether this is a small town, a spaceship, or a thriving city, start developing it in your series plan. I usually name a couple of key places that will be referenced or used in every single book.

This provides readers with that familiarity they're looking for, and it builds trust between you and the reader that you know what you're doing. That no matter how bad things get for the people inside the pages, you'll be right there to fix everything…eventually.

3. If you can make your connected characters and sense of place fit within the patterns and parameters of what you gathered in the first step (market research, trends, tropes, genre expectations, what readers like, etc.), even better. Note it and hit that gong hard when you go to write.

**ONE LAST THING:** The way to cash cow stardom is writing consistently in a series. Analyze that sentence and see what you're doing wrong if you think you've done this but you're not seeing growth.

There is one major key word there: consistently. You must write consistently in a series if you want it to bring money to you day and night, month after month, year after year. So think about how consistent you've been with releases, with marketing, with packaging, and even with the stories inside the pages of your books that reside inside a series.

Sometimes the inconsistency can cause a series to start to stink like a fish left out in the hot sun. (*Finally! That fishing metaphor she mentioned earlier in the book!*) This doesn't mean the whole series is bad. It means

you have some work to do to figure out where you derailed and how you can get back on track with the consistency readers crave in a series.

Okay, I think we've spent enough time talking about writing. I mean, we can talk and talk about it, but if we never do it, that's not going to bring the bucks to the bank, is it?

Nope. So let's move on to the actual writing of the bestseller.

## GOALS FOR THE BOOK/SERIES

Okay, first, we need a pause chapter. Yes, I lied to you. I said we'd get to the writing part, but this wouldn't be an Indie Inspiration book if we didn't talk about goals.

So we're just going to pause for a brief moment and do that. Don't die.

I don't do anything without a goal. What are you hoping to do with this series (because you're totally writing a series now, not a single book, right?)? Rank organically? Reward readers? Earn a lot of money? Get #1 flags?

What is the goal?

I usually break things down further than series too. I label every release as Soft, Medium, or Hard, and I put marketing efforts in conjunction with each of those accordingly. The entire last half of this book will go over those plans in detail, so you'll be able to plan your Soft, Medium, or Hard launches too.

So every book release, under every pen name of mine, is assigned a launch tier. Then I do things within that tier to launch the book. Some of those things start early in the book's pre-order period, and some don't. Sometimes I deviate from my own plans, depending on the book and what it's about, what elements it has that I might be able to capitalize on, the time of year, etc.

Everything inside the launch plan is fluid. Sometimes I'm on top of my game, and sometimes I'm just getting hit in the face with a basketball over and over. (My word, a sports mention! Who knew I had that inside me?)

But no matter what, every launch has a goal.

It doesn't really matter what the goal is, but I think you should have one. And if you've ever read one of my Indie books, you know I like the SMART method.

**Specific** – what are you hoping to achieve with this launch specifically?

**Measurable** – this is something you can see in real things. Numbers, flags, category placements, units sold, pages read, amount earned, etc. Those things can be broken down further too. Perhaps you have a goal to make 4 figures on Barnes & Nobel with this next launch. That's a goal.

**Attainable** – you shouldn't set goals that are wildly out of your current reach. Once you've grabbed that prize, then you look forward to the next one. But if you're making $500/month right now, a goal of $10,000 next month is, well, probably unattainable. And unattainable goals only make us feel like garbage.

If you want to make yourself feel like that, sure, set an unattainable goal. But I don't advocate for that. I think every author reading this book should look at where they are right this minute. In fact, stop reading here and go figure that out if you don't know.

How much are you making on Amazon US? Amazon UK? Barnes & Noble? Audible/ACX? Findaway Voices? Do you know?

If income isn't your goal, then perhaps you'll look at how many pages you get each day. For those who don't know, if your books are enrolled in KDP Select on the author side, then they're in the reading program Kindle Unlimited (KU). Readers pay a monthly fee for this subscription service, like you might for Netflix or Hulu, so they're not actually paying for your book. They're paying a subscription service to read as many books in the KU program as they want.

When readers download your book in KU, you get paid based on the number of pages they read. We call these pagereads, and Amazon assigns your book a certain number of pages based on the length of it.

So do you know your average daily pagereads, or average monthly pagereads? If you have more than one name, have you broken them into their pseudonyms and analyzed who's getting the most reads or the most sales for you?

It's okay if you don't do this, obviously. Some people are not numbers people. I like numbers because they don't lie. It's not a feeling I have, nor is it dependent on what someone else is selling that day (or hour) the way rank is.

Numbers tell me which of my 4 pen names is worth continuing. Which one gets the most reads, the most sales, on which retailers, in audio, etc. If you're not a numbers person, that's okay. You don't have to look every day. In fact, when I got super sick earlier this year (2021), I stopped looking at a lot of things every day. Rank and bestseller list placement? Stopped checking obsessively.

Preorders? Checked every 3-4 days, sometimes longer.

Income? I actually gave that task to my sixteen-year-old daughter and let her pull my ad reports and scrape my income…whenever she had time.

And you know what? My business didn't tank because I stopped looking at the numbers every day. (Let's be honest, sometimes every hour or two…) I thought it might, and that might seem silly to you. But as a person driven by the numbers, they seemed so important. I must know them at any given moment of any given day.

Turns out…nope. I didn't need that information in my head. I didn't have a mental slot to hold it anyway.

So if you're in a place where you don't want to obsess over the numbers, then don't. Perhaps they'll be something you check the night before a release for preorder numbers (if you're doing one of those), and

then a few days after the release to see how the numbers shook out that day, the next day, whatever.

I do think you need some sort of goal to help get you out of your marketing comfort zone and stretch for that next level. That's what my number goals have done for me. When I hit $10,000/month income, I immediately started looking to the next level.

I've hit plenty of income plateaus too. You might know how frustrating those plateaus can be. You're working, working, working and nothing changes? What in the world? What is the blasted point?

I've been there. Four or five times, so if you have too, you're not alone.

I'm comfortable at my current level. My business and brands can get to this level each month without me doing much different than I'm currently doing. If I want to get higher, I have to *do something* more than I normally do.

I have to set a goal. I have to stretch. I have to learn, grow, and change what I'm doing now into something different (notice I didn't say *better*) in order to *get* something different.

Sometimes I think authors want to be spoon-fed exactly what to do. Step-by-step, with illustrations, would be nice. Right?

I know I fall into this category sometimes. I recently read a new marketing/craft book, and I just wanted someone else to make me a list. Tell me what to do. I didn't want to watch the movies or read the books to make my own list.

Don't do that. No one is going to spoon-feed you in this business, not even me! I'm long-winded, but you have to bring your own open mind, your own utensils, and open your mouth yourself to consume what's put out there.

You have to do the work.

So look at where you are, and then set a goal that makes you reach. That makes you go - I don't know how on earth I'm *ever* going to achieve *this*,

but I'm going to keep trying until I do.

**Realistic** – This one goes along with attainable in my mind. After all, there's not really a goal that's not attainable, except for maybe me running longer than 30 seconds or weighing something like 49 pounds.

Be realistic about your growth. I've been writing since 2007. I started in trad-pub in 2011, after a few years of querying agents, getting rejections, and then signing with a Big 5 publisher. I started self-publishing in 2014, and it was a disaster. I made nothing.

For two straight years, my annual income didn't exceed $1600. For *two years*.

The first time I did make more than that was when I had 3 books out under my Liz Isaacson name, and I had finally started to write what readers wanted to read. At that time, there were no Facebook groups for help. There were no eBooks talking about writing to market or how to launch my books.

I had to figure it all out on my own. I did, and I failed a lot. I learned a lot too, and even then, from January 2016 (my first four figure month) to today (October 2021 – almost 6 full years of Indie publishing), I would've never dreamed that I'd make 7-figures in a year. Never. Ever.

My goal was to make an additional $500/month so I could keep my daughter in dance and pay for my son's church service mission. That was literally my goal.

But as I reached that, I didn't quit. I was like, Okay, this is now a reality. What could be my next reality? $1000/month? $5000? $10,000?

And so on. But be realistic with where you are now and the time it takes to grow into something more than you are now. This is why I watch my preorders and try to get just 1 more than the previous book in the series. Just 1.

**Timebound** – Most amazing goals are tied to time somehow. For the launch of your book, what are you going to be looking at and for how long?

Just release day? That's fine.

Release week?

Release month?

Release quarter?

Every release until the series is complete? (And then what? That would be my next question. Why stop marketing old series' just because they're finished? In fact, that's a whole new time to start advertising them and bringing in more people! Faster read-through. No waiting. Binge today! Right?)

It doesn't matter what time component you attach to your release—and it might change with every one you do. Perhaps you'll develop a time system for your Soft, Medium, and Hard releases that will help you complete certain tasks for that release, within that timeframe.

That's perfect.

But having a goal that is tied to an end-date can help you know if you achieved your goal or not.

Phew! Okay, so that's the system I use to set goals for my releases. One of mine might be: This is a Hard release on a Book 1 in a new series. I have chapters linked at the back of the last book of my last series, but I know my Book 1s are never "winners" out of the gate.

So…I'm going to aim for a preorder number of 1000 preorders by release day. (That's specific, measurable, attainable and realistic for me personally, and tied to a date—the release day.)

Then, because this is a Hard release, I'm going to watch the rank. My last book got to #117 on release day once the KU downloads kicked in. This is a Book 1… I'm going to be happy if I break the top 500 for this book on release day. (That's a number-specific, measurable, attainable and realistic rank for me, and tied to release day specifically.)

Then, I'm going to watch my KU pagereads. I have a lot of KU readers—for this brand/name, it's a 70/30 split between pages and sales. So by Day

4 of this release, I want to see 60,000 pages/day on this book alone to see if people are actually reading the book after downloading it in KU. (That's a number-specific, measurable, attainable and realistic goal for pages for me, and tied to a period of time.)

See how this works?

I'd also set goals for my marketing efforts. I'd have a budget not to exceed, unless the book is performing really well with the ads, responding the way I want, and earning me a lot more than I'm spending. Then I might adjust those goals.

So don't be afraid to adjust your goals. Ever. Didn't work? Try to figure out why, then fail forward. Use the failure to take a step forward instead of backward—or worse, standing still and doing nothing.

**Homework:**

1. Look at your past book performance.
2. Figure out what you're earning on each platform, each Amazon store (I only do the English speaking ones, TBH).
3. Know your KU / sales split.
4. Devise a way to check your numbers that is mentally and physically healthy for you.
5. Then, set a goal for your next release. Make plans to achieve that goal (again, I'll have details on the Soft, Medium, and Hard releases I do, and what each plan entails coming up!).

Once you know what you want to achieve, writing an amazing, stellar, fabulous, unputdownable book is a little easier. So are you ready to start writing?

I expect cheering at this moment in time.

# PART I

# THE ACTUAL WRITING OF A BESTSELLER

## WRITING THE BOOK

I almost went to another topic right here, but I thought there might be individual mutinies rising up all over the world as people read this book. So I'm going to stick with my promise to talk about how to write that bestseller now.

But you should know I wanted to skip ahead to the next part, which talks about packaging that bestseller. See, for me, I almost always (I'd say 95% of the time) have my title, subtitle, series title, blurb, and cover done before I even start writing a word of the book.

Fine! That's a lie too.

Sometimes I'm still working out some of those things—particularly in the blurb—when I write the first 2 chapters of the book. See, I write the first 2 chapters of my next book immediately upon finishing the one before it. So when I finish Book 1, part of that is instantly writing the first 2 chapters of Book 2.

Sometimes those 2 chapters just sit there and do nothing for months. It just depends how much time there is between releases. But with my new, 6-month-gap-between-books-experiment? I write those first 2 chapters at least 2 months before the previous book comes out, and then they sit for another oh, 5 or 6 months…

But they're there. They're done.

This is a trick I play with myself to curb the panic as deadlines approach. Stupid, I know. I mean, I played the trick on myself. Duh, right?

But when I go to start that book, and holy cow, I only have 12 days to write 75,000 words (and let's not kid ourselves here either. It'll be more like 85,000), it's fantastic to open the document and realize the first 5000-6000 words are done!

I'm always like, *yes! I am a Rockstar. I am now ahead of the game by a whole day! Go me!*

Past Me has set Future Me up for some great success once I'm ready to start that book. Because of this trick, I'm able to start working on my book with a positive attitude, with chapters that immediately set the stage for the book, that remind me of where I was going (more on that later), and with all of the things I need to know (pets, people, places) already there at the end of the two chapters.

It's amazing. Past Me really does Future Me a BIG favor by instantly writing those extra, beginning 2 chapters at "the end" of every book.

So I sometimes do actually have 5000-6000 words of my book written before my blurb is final. I very nearly always have a cover already, which means I have a title, a subtitle, and a series title. I have the book up for preorder.

And all of those items will be addressed in the following part on Packaging Your Book. So I really wanted to do that part here, but I'm not going to!

Let's talk about writing your bestseller.

So there is no way I can dedicate as much time as you might need to improving your craft. I will list some resources at the end of this chapter, and I'll put them on the resources page for this book on my website. That will be listed at the bottom of this chapter too.

That said, here are a few very key things I think authors should seriously consider improving should they want to improve the performance

of their sales.

Let's start with some theory, and maybe some revolutionary thoughts. Most of us didn't come to writing with the intent to make products to sell. I know I didn't. I mean, I wasn't manufacturing bracelets or blankets at my kitchen table with the intent to sell them.

Were you?

My mom makes the most beautiful gourd art in the world. When she first started, it was a hobby that quickly became a business. When she sits down to "work on her art," the main goal is to create something that in the end, **will be sold**.

She's making a product, utilizing her creativity and genius with a wood burner, carving tools, and unique materials like porcupine quills and feathers.

Have you ever considered that you're doing the exact same thing?

When you sit down to "work on your book," you're creating a product. Something that, in the end, will be sold to someone happy to sink into their bed, tea and cat nearby, and consume until the very last page.

If you haven't considered that, now is probably the time.

If you don't want to make money with your art, that's 100% fine too. Sometimes I write what I call my "angry-girl books," and they're books not meant for the general public. They're just meant for me as I work through some of my own inner demons, personal issues, and the like.

By the way—tangent—if every piece of writing you produce is meant for public consumption, I think you might really benefit from taking 20 minutes every few days or every week to ***not do that***.

I can hear you going, *Seriously, Elana? You want me to spend my precious time writing something I have no intention of selling?*

Yes.

Yes, that's what I want you to do.

I want you to love writing. I want you to be the healthiest, most whole person you can be. Writing is only *one* thing you do. It is not your whole identity.

I use my "angry-girl writing" to bleed out the bad in my life, which only leaves room for the good. And then, that good gets put into my books. The love I have for writing shines through. Have you ever heard an author advise another to make sure they love what they're writing? That readers can feel it?

I believe that about halfway. I do think readers can feel the love we have for our stories, and I think by taking the things about writing we don't like and putting them into a piece, a story, a poem, whatever, that *no one except us will ever see* is incredibly freeing and allows us to pour the love and joy we have for creating into the words people will happily pay for and read.

Anyway, back to the topic at hand—your book is a product. And the fundamental fact is, your book (the product) should be working harder than you are.

I'm going to put that here again: **Your book should work harder than you do.**

If you put an ad on a really good book, that book, complete with its stellar packaging and superb storytelling within that packaging, will do the job of converting readers to fans. *The book* will get them to read the next one. And then that book will get them to read the third, then the fourth, and so on.

And if you can deliver 3-4 fantastic reading experiences, that builds trust between you and the reader, possibly while you're on vacation or sleeping. You did it with your storytelling, your craft, and your passion for writing.

The reader gets what they want. You do too, as after a few experiences of a good story, well-written and told, that reader will go on to read anything they can find with your name on it.

Sounds amazing, right? That's living the dream right there.

And it starts with the product. With the book itself. *It* should do all the work once you release it and start advertising to get people to read it.

The ads are easier to manage when the product is good. The ads are cheaper when the product is good. The ads are more effective and deliver better ROI (return on investment) when the product is good.

Now, just because your ads aren't easy to manage, cost a lot, and don't have great ROI doesn't mean you wrote a bad book. Perhaps there's just something off about it. Something in the packaging. Something in the blurb. Something you tried to hit on that's not popular right now.

Sometimes you wrote a donkey. It might be the very best donkey in the world. Even ears and a very nice braying voice and smooth-as-velvet fur and all that. But it's still a donkey, and donkeys don't win the Kentucky Derby.

Man, I love a good horse racing analogy.

Everyone and their Shetland pony has donkeys. Absolutely everyone. And if you don't, the only word I have for you is, "Yet."

And maybe "Lucky!"

LOL.

But seriously. I have a whole herd of donkeys that follow me into my nightmares. Sometimes they bray loudly at me to change them, wave a wand and make them racehorses. Sometimes I manage to do that with new covers, a new spin toward what's trending or popular right now in the blurb and tagline, and a new title.

That's relaunching an old book to try to play CinderDonkey and turn a donkey into a racehorse. Sometimes it works too! My work wife, Bonnie Paulson, and I wrote a whole series on Rewriting, Recovering, and Relaunching your book in my Indie Inspiration group on Facebook. I'll link to it at the end of the chapter.

Obviously, you'll save yourself some time, effort, and sleepless nights if you write a racehorse from the beginning.

That's what I hope to explore next. So let's saddle up and stop braying around!

## ONE: CRAFT

I'm going to go over The Four C's that I use to help turn my creativity into a sellable product. Hopefully, an unputdownable book. Hopefully, a book that will work harder than I do in converting new readers into superfans.

The first one is CRAFT.

This is the actual writing of a story. It's not the plot. It's not the characters. It's not the packaging.

It's the actual storytelling ability you possess. The best part about writing craft is that it can be learned. Some people, of course, have more natural ability than others, but it's my belief that everyone, no matter how many books you've written or who you've sold those book to, has room to improve.

Even me.

I regularly take craft and writing classes to help me improve the actual words, the order of those words, and the way I tell a story. I believe that if you're not constantly improving, you're standing still, and we've already established that that's worse than moving backward.

If you've written a few donkeys, pausing for a minute to take a class—and there are a great many online—could help your next book or series become a racehorse.

Simply doing the same thing you've always done is not going to get you a different result. Usually.

I was watching one of my favorite movies the other day, *Ratatouille*. If you haven't seen it, man, what are you waiting for? Yes, it's a cartoon about a rat with heightened senses who wants to learn to cook.

I get that. Maybe you just need to give it a chance!

In the movie, there's a celebrity chef this rat, named Remy, emulates. His name is Gusteau. And Gusteau's motto is "Anyone can cook."

I just said that I think anyone can learn to write, and I totally stand behind that. Anyone can write.

But in the movie, near the beginning, Chef Gusteau says, "Great cooking is not for the faint of heart. You must be imaginative. Strong-hearted. You must try things that may not work. And you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul.

"What I say is true: Anyone can cook. But only *the fearless can be great*."

I think that applies to writing too. Anyone can do it. But only the fearless can be great.

Only those who try things that may not work will find the things that do.

You must be imaginative, strong-hearted, and willing to not let your past writing issues, whatever they may be, limit you as you move forward.

So the challenge here is to dig way down deep inside yourself, set your pride aside, and discover if you have craft weaknesses you need to address. I was forced to do this early on in my career.

When you query over two hundred literary agents, and you get told no, no, no over and over and *over*, you have to face the music.

Or the lack of good writing.

I was told my pacing was poor, so I found books that addressed pacing specifically and I practiced making it better.

I was told I was good at dialogue, so I tucked that strength into my pocket and ran with it.

I was told my characters were flat and "cardboard," so I took classes on how to breathe life into them. (Character is the next section, and a pillar of my Four C's, so hang tight for that!)

I was told my plot was boring, so I dug into what makes a good science fiction and/or fantasy novel (what I was writing at the time). I read books, articles, and anything else I could find about how to write science fiction, about world-building, about magic systems, about technology.

I've attended live, in-person conferences about weapons, medical training, horse care, plus-sized characters, using vibrant verbs, writing a male POV authentically, the formula of a romance novel, trimming extraneous words, crafting masterful beginnings, how to end chapters so readers can't stop, open loops in fiction, creating story questions, pacing and more pacing, and then *more pacing*. And so many more classes and workshops, online and live, I can't name them all.

I've taken classes on the structure of novels, and as I did, I developed a spreadsheet that spoke to my heart and helped me plan my novels in a way that I liked, that worked for me and my brain, and that gave me a crutch to lean on anytime I started to get lost inside the mass of words inside an actual book.

So my question to you is: Do you know what you need to improve in your writing and storytelling? Do you know what you're already really good at?

And the challenge is: Identify one thing you can improve, and find a book, workshop, or class to work on improving it.

This should not be a marketing class. I find that so many authors want to take the Facebook Ads class before they even have a product that will sell. An Amazon or Facebook ad is not going to save a book that doesn't deliver a reading experience readers want.

That might be super harsh, and I'll apologize for that.

But the very first step in writing and launching a bestseller is the actual *writing of the book*.

Let's revisit Ratatouille. While Remy and the ghost of Gusteau are looking down on the kitchen, the rat is identifying all the "important" chefs and cooks below. One person there is the "garbage boy," and Remy says he's not important. He just takes out the trash or whatever.

Gusteau reminds him that anyone can cook.

Remy says, "Anyone *can*. That doesn't mean anyone *should*."

Then, throughout the rest of the movie, we watch as he, a rat, helps this "garbage boy" by cooking with him. In the end, anyone definitely can and should cook. I mean, not me. I hate cooking with a passion. There's a reason I live in this day and age, with whoever invented DoorDash, praise the heavens!

You can be like that garbage boy. Perhaps you think you're not important in whatever sphere you currently write in. Perhaps you're right. But that doesn't mean you have to stay there. You can elevate your product from "I should not be writing," to "I am a master writer," by improving your craft.

That's the first step in writing a bestseller.

I find that there are scads and scads of marketing books out there. How to write fast books. How to launch. How to do cover copy. How to this, how to that—and it's all related to the packaging and marketing of the book.

But what about the book itself?

Friends, that book is more important than any marketing you can learn right now. If that book is not going to work harder than you… you're setting yourself up for frustration, fruitless endeavors, and further failure.

That's great if that's what you want to do.

But it really is better to write racehorses than try to magically transform a donkey into a thoroughbred.

You do that by improving your craft.

You, as an author, are making a promise to the reader when you package a book and put it up for sale. Your book must deliver on the promise, it must deliver on the premise, if you want to start building that bridge of trust and turning new-to-you readers into superfans. Here are some ideas for you to get started on improving your craft.

1. Read the books with a lot of good reviews in your sub-genre, where your book would fit once you've written it. This might not be a bestseller, to be clear.

2. Get edited. I think one of the single most valuable things that happened to me from being in the traditional publishing industry was getting edited by professional, perfectionist editors.

3. Join a critique group or find some beta readers. Learn how to listen to what they're saying and make decisions that ring true to you, as well as to discard the things that don't make sense to you or that don't fit your story.

Remember, *you're* the author of the book. Not every suggestion should be followed. Listen first. Learn as you do. Only change what makes sense to you in your head and then your heart.

4. Do not get married to anything you write, ever. The same goes for a cover too… Just gonna throw that out early here, so when we get to it in the Packaging section, you're prepped for more harshness.

If you view what you're doing as creating a product to the best of your ability, by pouring your creativity and your craft into the words and characters, and accepting that any brilliance you come up with now might be deleted later, you'll have a much easier time writing racehorses.

5. Always be learning. Take classes on craft, specifically. Shelve marketing for now. It's craft you need to focus on. Ask your betas or friends who've read your books (or better yet—the readers!) to tell you what they don't like about your books.

A word of warning: Don't do this if you can't handle the truth. Readers, especially, won't hold back. They'll tell you what they don't like! These might not be craft issues at all—readers don't normally go, *You start a lot of sentences the same way*, or *The voice is so passive in the last half of chapter three.*

You'll get more feedback about character from readers. They adore characters, and you can get a lot of insight as to what they like and don't like about character if you ask them.

Betas and critique partners should be able to help you identify strengths and weaknesses, and then you can find a workshop, class, seminar, or training that addresses that weakness.

Start with 1. Identify it, find a class, take it, and apply what you learn.

Okay, take a deep breath. This is a heavy section, without a lot of very tangible steps. After all, I can't tell you, *you're not great at pacing. Therefore, read this exact book and get better!*

Once again, only you can do the work required to improve your craft. I will say that the first thing I wonder when someone posts in a group, forum, or messages me on Facebook about how their books don't sell is—*I wonder if their craft could be improved. I wonder if they're working harder than the book.*

No one wants to hear this, I know. I know I didn't. It's very difficult to go to critique group and be told where your writing and storytelling lacks. But honestly, improving your writing ability is probably *the very best way* to improve your bottom line.

**Resources - all of these will be linked on my website:** http://elanajohnson.com/launchingbestseller

- Stein On Writing by Sol Stein – this is the book I used to learn more about pacing. https://books2read.com/u/bzdOjD
- On Writing by Stephen King - https://books2read.com/u/b5oaZ7
- RWA-U – this is where I took countless online classes about crafting a romance novel. You don't have to be a member of RWA to take the workshops; they'll just cost a little more. https://www.rwa.org/Online/Events/Chapter_Events/Online/Events/Chapter_Events.aspx
- Margie Lawson Academy – this is where I've taken several packet and online courses to help me improve my writing the very most. She has some of the most excellent workshops I've ever taken to improve the actual writing inside a text. I can literally hear her voice in my head when I sit (or stand now!) to write a chapter in my fiction. In fact, I've used several of the rhetorical devices she teaches so far in this book… And the more you do it, the better you get at it. https://www.margielawson.com/lawson-writers-academy/
- Rewriting, Recovering, and Relaunching Your Book Guide by me and Bonnie Paulson - in the Indie Inspiration Facebook Group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/IndieInspiration/learning_content/?filter=1317384398692237
- Save the Cat by Blake Snyder (the whole Save the Cat trilogy is well-read actually): https://books2read.com/u/3LwXg0
- Romancing the Beat by Gwen Hayes: https://books2read.com/u/bPQaKJ
- Romance Beat Sheet by Jami Gold: https://jamigold.com/for-writers/worksheets-for-writers/
- The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines by Tami D. Cowden et al: https://books2read.com/u/4Dx5Wg

- Writing the Breakout Novel by Donald Maas: https://books2read.com/u/4EK2oo
- Write Your Novel From the Middle by James Scott Bell: https://books2read.com/u/bpaVDz
- How to Use Universal Fantasy to Sell Your Book to Anyone by T. Taylor: https://books2read.com/UniversalFantasyII
- Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott: https://books2read.com/u/m2lyZr
- Take Off Your Pants! by Libbie Hawker: https://books2read.com/u/mgEolK

## TWO: CHARACTERS

The second of The Four C's is character. This one is second to craft, but by the narrowest margin you can imagine. Like a paper-thin margin, in my opinion. Readers will forgive some clunky sentence and grammatical errors if they're in love with your characters.

Remember when I said readers wanted characters that are larger than life while remaining true to life? Think about that for a second. Really think about what you think it means. Then think about some of the characters you've created in the past.

Real life is boring. The character has to be better than that.

But he has to be real too. Readers have to connect to him, yeah?

What genre you're writing in makes a difference here. I once took a class about writing in the romance genre, and one of the biggest take-aways I learned was that the heroes in a romance novel are exactly that—romanticized.

Of course not every cowboy in Texas is six-foot-four, with muscles from here to the Mississippi. But in my books, they are. They also all have dark hair, can grow a beard in less than 6 hours, and have a special way with children, dogs, and horses alike.

Right?

Why do we do that as romance writers?

Because the primary readers of romance novels are women. And women want a good-looking hero to fall in love with a woman that's *just like them*, but a little "better." They have to be able to see themselves in the heroine of a romance novel, and they have to have a male lead they really want to fall in love with them, er, the heroine.

That's who a romance novel is written for. If I fail to do that, I will fail to convert readers from new-to-me to superfans. They might be lukewarm and read a few books and then drop away to someone else who delivers a more swoon-worthy hero. A better reading experience. Something familiar to them they want every time they open a romance novel.

All genres have a specific type of main character that must be present. Cozy mysteries have eccentric female leads who generally like cats more than dogs, fall down a lot or are klutzy in other ways, and have their nose in the small town's business a lot of the time. Oh, and she's always dating a member of law enforcement.

Thrillers have main characters who are smart, quick on their feet, and can think rationally while being trapped in a confined space, a fire burning nearby, and an anagram to figure out before the escape trap will open. I mean, I dream of the day I can blow up an apartment with just a newspaper and a toaster, don't you? (If you don't know what this references, I'm sorry. It's Jason Bourne. He's resourceful, can do anything, and never loses. Right? He's the epitome of a thriller / action & adventure hero. If you're writing books in that genre, you need a Jason Bourne.)

Fantasy and science fiction take the shy farm boy or insecure book nerd and transform them into kick-butt heroes and heroines that save the world, using a special set of skills only *they* possess. Often, those main characters don't even know they possess those skills, and they must come into their magic or their skillset throughout the series until they become the kings and queens they were born to be.

Yes?

Do you know what type of characters must be present in the genre you're writing? If you don't, you should read more, take those notes in your prettiest notebook, and identify *who* resonates with readers.

You've done the plot work. You've done the writing work. Now you need to know *who* readers connect with and want to read more of.

Do that, and you're about 75% of the way toward creating the right types of characters that will have readers devouring book after book with your name on the cover.

That last 25% is done under the freshness column.

In my romance novel, sure I'm going to make every hero dreamy, dashing, and darlingly flawed. The heroine is of course The One, and she's going to love him despite those flaws, or she'll heal him of those emotional wounds from his past when he was previously with who he thought was The One who really wasn't.

But everyone who writes romance is doing this. So how do I make mine different? And in this case, I do want *different* to mean *better*. I want it to mean more compelling. I want it to mean a one-click buy or download, because I will deliver someone readers recognize as familiar, but who is also entirely different (and better) than every other hero and heroine they have read before.

This is where the female mechanic comes in. I'm sure I'm not the first and only person to write a fictional female mechanic. The idea is preposterous. That's another thing you should understand—it's not about the twists and turns, the spins or the uniqueness you want to create. It's not about coming up with something no one has ever done before.

That's unfamiliar, and I think we've already established that unfamiliar equals…not great.

Again, what you want to do is take the familiar and add to it. Not twist. No spins. No. Just no. You *use* the familiar, and you *add freshness*.

So I take my female mechanic, and I *freshen her up* with other things that are also familiar in the genre, and which will allow my readers *to connect with her emotionally*.

Readers read to escape, and they read to *feel something*. They want to connect to your characters, and when they do…well, that's magic. That's how you transform the donkey into a racehorse. It's how the maid becomes Cinderella. It's why readers will one-click to preorder the next book in your series.

It's because of fantastic *characters*.

So, I took my amazing, totally cute by the way, female mechanic, and I made her a single mother of her beloved sister's son.

I gave her a lot of confidence in a male-dominated world, but when it came to talking to the hero, she was hopeless.

I made their first date a disaster. (Who hasn't had one of those?? Seriously, if you haven't, I don't want to talk to you…for very long. Ha!)

But my female mechanic? She doesn't just give up because things are hard. She understands hard. There are a lot of people who understand *hard* in their lives. And they're reading a story about someone who does too, and the character overcomes that hard. It gives readers hope that they can overcome the hard things in their lives too. They get to see the heroes and heroines in their books doing that, and they want to do it too.

They want to connect.

I made my mechanic much younger than her cowboy (15 years younger), but just as mature as him, so the age difference didn't really matter.

I gave her all of these things, and then I gave her a man who's the perfect complement to all of the above. When I had three tornadoes hit the town, and her house is in disrepair, and the mechanic shop is closed, and the schools are too, who's there to help this strong, capable single mother from cracking?

The cowboy billionaire, of course.

The hero needs just as many things to overcome as the heroine—more in a romance novel, because remember, women are the primary readers of romance, and they read it for the hero. They read it for the hero to treat the woman who's just-right for him like she's his queen.

He has to have problems too. ***All*** characters should have two things that I've added to my outlining spreadsheets to make sure I don't create fictional characters that are too perfect. Those two things are issues and flaws.

Every person on this earth has issues and flaws. I'm sure you can name a few for yourself. If you can't, perhaps you can for your spouse, life partner, or ex-boyfriend…

Right?

We all have issues and flaws. Most of us are doing our best with them, trying to overcome them, all that good jazz.

Your characters should have issues and flaws too. We want them to be larger than life, which is where the billionaire part comes in for my hero and the strong female lead in a domineering male world does too.

But they're also relatable, because they suffer from issues, preconceived notions, bad first dates, and flaws just like everyone else in this world.

In real estate, it's location, location, location.

In fiction, it's relatable, relatable, relatable.

You need characters who readers can relate to. When my husband and I start a Hallmark movie, we know in the first 3.7 minutes if we're going to like it. He's a man and I'm a woman, and we have different buttons that have to be pushed in order to keep watching.

But no matter what, we both have to like the main characters and want to be able to cheer for them for the next 90 minutes. If he doesn't like one or the other, he's looking at me like, *Do you like them? DO YOU??*

I have to like both the hero and heroine, but especially the hero. He has to be good-looking, according to my opinions on what that word means. We

have to want them to be together at the end. If either of us don't like the characters or we don't care if they get together, we don't watch the movie.

And we know in the first few minutes.

Readers might give you more time that that, but there are a lot of entertainment options, so make sure your book is filled with what readers want, and a huge part of that comes in the form of the characters.

So these two rows (one labeled ISSUES and one labeled FLAWS) goes right into my outline spreadsheet on the character tab, and I give them to *all* the characters that will play any part in my book or series.

Of course, then the characters have to overcome their flaws and issues (maybe not all of them, but the ones specifically holding them back from falling in love or winning the war and saving the universe) in the book, which again, gives readers hope that they too can overcome their issues and flaws.

They too are worthy of love. They too will find their happily-ever-after. They too will find the other person in their life that will heal their wounds, teach them how to temper their flaws, and show them that their real issue was that they just hadn't met each other yet.

If you make readers feel something while they're reading, they'll one-click the next book.

If you give readers the impression that they too will overcome the hard things in their lives, they'll read another book by you.

If you give readers characters that allow them to see themselves and then watch themselves heal and prevail over their issues and flaws, they're yours forever.

And remember, you need to do this in each and every book, consistently, which is our next cornerstone, so I won't delve into it yet. Give readers stellar writing, great storytelling, and characters they connect with, and wow. You're well on your way to building superfans that will read whatever you release.

Which is what you want, right?

**Homework:**

1. Create a character sheet for yourself if you don't have one yet. I've put mine on my website with the resources for this book, so if you'd like to start there, you can. Warning, it's an Excel spreadsheet, which I know gives some people hives on sheer principle. You've been warned.

2. Identify the types of characters in the bestsellers that people seem to have really connected with. Make a list of why and what traits those characters have that you can reference when you're creating your own.

3. Make yourself a note that says: *Larger than life, but relatable.* No character should ever be glossed over. They should be romanticized and realistic at the same time. It's a tall feat, but you can do it!

**Resources:**

- Character/Outline Template Excel sheet: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1UyRrP-jp_Y5DLXYCcJQKUq1TOL43zb14_yOZJa7WFXo/edit?usp=sharing

## THREE: CONSISTENCY

This is the third cornerstone of a really amazing series or career. It's consistency. Consistency in branding, which is a packaging issue we'll talk about in a little bit. Consistency in style and craft. Consistency in character. Consistency in releasing.

I was trying to figure out how to explain consistency and its importance in your business and brand. Or how it can really help you level up. So I looked up the definition.

*Consistency: conformity in the application of something.*

That didn't really help me. Perhaps now you're crystal clear, but I was like, *hmm. What does that mean?* So I looked up conformity.

*Conformity: compliance with standards, rules, or laws.*

My word. Another C-word? Compliance?

I'm not going to look that up.

Basically, you want to be consistent, which is much easier to understand. *Being consistent is: acting or being done in the same way over time.*

That's what you want for your books as products. When you want a taco, where do you go? Probably your favorite taco truck or Mexican restaurant. We don't hit up McDonald's for a taco.

We go somewhere we already know where we can get a really great taco, each and every time. If sometimes the food is good there, and sometimes it's not, we might stop going. Because no one wants to take a chance that their money and time will be wasted on a bad taco.

It's the same concept for books. We make them look a certain way with a cover. We put a title on them. We write up a delicious description to get people salivating over the book. Restaurants do all of the above too. They might have a color photo of the mouthwatering taco alongside the list of ingredients and the name of it.

Sound familiar? That's your Amazon product page right there. It's a taco. And if you want to attract a reader back to your brand time and time again, you have to give them the same quality of taco over and over *and over* again, with each and every book.

That's being consistent with your writing. You need to be consistent in your packaging too, which we'll cover in the next part. Covers within a series—wait. I'm going to talk about all of that later!

Bottom line—be consistent within your brand.

If you're part of my Indie Inspiration group, you know I'm a huge advocate for pen names. I started creating pens as a way to protect my main earner, Liz Isaacson. I'd stumbled my way to success with her, learning, failing forward, and growing with each lesson and failure. I didn't want the other things I wanted to write to take anything from her, and I wanted her brand to remain precisely what it was. She writes in one genre, super niched down, and that is that.

But I want to write other things, so I create pen names to do those things. By doing that, I'm able to create consistent branding for that name and genre, while maintaining the consistency in branding and genre for Liz.

So consistency can speak to why pen names can be beneficial. People will know simply by looking at a book cover what they're going to get, and

they don't need to read the blurb to know they want this taco. One-click. Buy. Read. Review.

If you can create this type of consistency in your product (the writing) and in your packaging (the next section), you can build your brand one book at a time that delivers time and time again.

The books you write will do more work than you, and you can then earn more and more while you sleep, sip a cold drink on the beach, or solidify your plot for your *next* bestseller.

There are a few other things I think you should consider when talking consistency.

**Book length** – at least across series. Within a series, you're giving readers the idea that they're going to get the same experience each time. Radically different book lengths can disrupt that experience and cause them to feel like you didn't deliver.

And when you don't deliver, they begin to mistrust you.

That said, I don't think a difference of 10,000-15,000 words is going to be that big of a deal. And longer is never a problem. It's writing an 80,000-word Book1, 2, and 3, and then giving them a 25,000-word Book 4 that I think would disrupt your consistency and jar them of their expectations.

Is it a career-killer? Is anything?

No, probably not. But it's something to consider when considering consistency and what consistency can do for your bottom line.

**Writing style/POV** – again, across a series. I think if you start a series in third person, alternating chapters between male/female POVs, you should most likely continue with that pattern through the series.

Now, I write third person, past tense like this in my romances, but when I started writing family saga, I started adding in other POVs. This is okay—I stuck to the third person, past tense style. I made it very clear from the first two words of the chapter (first name, last name) who was narrating.

If you pick a writing style and stick with it, you'll be fine, whatever it is. I've read books with a chapter of first person prose, then third, then first, then third. Fine. The pattern was established, and the author stuck to it throughout.

In my trad-pub YA dystopian series, I narrated Book 1 from one POV, first person. In Book 2, there were two different POVs, first person, alternating. No problem. I stuck with the pattern established in the first 4 chapters. Book 3 was once again two new and different POVs, first person, alternating, to complete the trilogy.

Of course you can start a series in third person and deliver the first few books that way and then switch to first. I just think you run the risk of a reader going, *Oh, this wasn't the experience I'm used to from Amazing Authoress. Is Book 6 going to be like this? Maybe I won't read it…*

And maybe you won't. Readers are flexible, adaptable creatures. If they love your writing and your characters, your POV might not be a problem.

You may have noticed that I start a metric-ton of sentences with the words "and," "but," or "so." This is my conversational writing style. My voice comes through in that style. You should have one too, because readers get used to it, and while they may not think about it consciously, if the style is missing, they notice that something is "off."

**Genre, sub-genre, and sub-subgenre** – this is brand-specific and name-specific. I find better results in my advertising and efforts to bring in new readers to my brands that are super niched down and don't write outside that niche.

When I put big-money ads on one book in that brand, the entire brand lifts. This is how I took Liz to making $30,000/month to making $200,000/month over the course of 16 months. Liz Isaacson does not write anything but Christian cowboy romance. The end. Period. Nothing.

When you pick up a Liz Isaacson book, you know precisely what you're going to get.

It’s a taco.

Now, my Elana Johnson name…she doesn’t do so hot. She writes in a great big, broad genre called contemporary romance, and I niched it to beach romance.

That, in my opinion, was not a far enough sub-subgenre. She does okay, I won’t lie. With her books, she makes five figures/monthly consistently over the past 2 years. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.

But when you pick up an Elana Johnson book, you might get a cop. Or a paramedic. Or a billionaire. Or a cowboy. Or a sisters saga. Or a cherry orchard owner with some romantic suspense. Or, or, or.

You might get a good taco one time, and then the chef switches out the chicken for beef, and you’re like, *hmm, nope. I don’t eat red meat.* Or the salsa is too hot the next time. And the third time, the salsa is omitted completely.

The reading experience is not consistent.

And that type of inconsistency doesn’t allow readers to move from one series to the next and be assured that the next book they get will be one they love. So when I put big-money ads on Elana Johnson books, they really only sell that series and then the rest of the backlist keeps braying in the donkey pasture.

**Branding / packaging** – this is the look of your books on a retailer. Not your website, though you can have branding there too. But readers typically buy from a retailer. I recommend having a brand font for your name that you use on every book, no matter the series.

Then, I recommend using the same font and style for all books in a series so they look cohesive and complete, but that style and font can change from series to series. We’ll talk more about what packaging does and why it’s important in the next part. But consistency here too can tell readers at a glance that they’re going to get a satisfying, non-sucktacular read by an author for many books—because we’re writing in series, right?

Right.

**Homework:**

1. Look at your brand from as global of a perspective as you can. It is cohesive? Does it look like you've been doing the same thing, in the same way, over time? Or does it look more like a patchwork quilt?

2. Identify three things you can do more consistently, whether that be a specific type of character, the length of your book, or really narrowing the niche in which you write.

## FOUR: CAPABILITY

This is one of those words we abhor. It means the same thing as potential. If you can hear your mother in your head right now, I'm sorry.

You have such great potential.

Or maybe that 8th grade history teacher who glared at me for talking too much in his class. He'd take me into the hall and be all Disappointed-Face and say, "You have such great potential to be a leader. I need you to set a good example."

I hated the word potential growing up. It felt like this huge, heavy, hulking concept that would crush me if I let myself think too hard about it.

*Potential* and *capability* are the same thing, but capability starts with a C and potential does not, so Capability is the fourth of The Four C's to improve your writing. LOL.

Capability is the ability to do something. And the fact is, we all have different abilities. We all have strengths and weaknesses. We all have unique life situations. We all have things pulling on our time, energy, and money—and none of those are limitless.

So you might have the capability to take a few classes to improve your craft, but while you do that, you don't have time to write.

You might have the capability to hire a new cover designer for your 8-book series to get it more consistent, but if you do that, you can't pay for advertising.

You might understand all of the things I'm talking about here, but the thought of putting in the energy and effort to do them…nope. Not happening right now.

Time, energy, and money is all we have to spend. And we all have different amounts of it, and how much you have is entirely dependent on you. Not me. Not someone else. Not anyone else. Just you.

So it's important that you know or at least make an attempt to figure out what you're capable of—and more importantly, what you're not.

Then, you need to accept what you're not capable of and move forward with what you are.

I got very ill this past spring. My back hurt, my Covid non-taste and smell returned, I had mono, and I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes, all within 3 weeks of each other. I was exhausted, mentally, emotionally, and physically. I couldn't stay awake for more than 3-4 hours at a time.

I was in a lot of pain, and I suddenly had to change my diet, my workout regimen, my entire routine. My everyday life took on a brand new image.

Therefore, I had to take an hour while I was out of bed to try to figure out how I could do 12 hours of work in just 2. What could I give up? What did not need to be done today, this week, or this month? What never needed to be done again? (Obsessively checking bestseller lists to see where my books were, I'm looking at you.)

What did need to be done in the 2 hours I have available to me? What absolutely must get completed before the end of the week? The month?

What was I capable of doing?

And what was I not capable of doing?

This is a super amazing exercise, and while I hope none of you get long Covid symptom, a bulging disk in your back, mono, or pre-diabetes to figure it out, it was very valuable for me to go through my monster-tall list of to-do's and start eliminating them one by one.

I simply didn't have the capability.

I did think my business would bomb. I'd be bankrupt. All was lost.

And you know what?

It wasn't.

I had the best June, July, and August of my career, earning over or almost a quarter of a million dollars in each of those months. And I didn't set up a single new ad. I didn't download a single ad report. I turned off the vast majority of my Facebook ads for the whole month of September, and I only left one BookBub ad running under one name during this time.

I canceled 2 preorders and pushed out 6 more. I wrote the books with deadlines that were burning hotly toward me. I worked out twice a day. I changed how I ate. I went to 15 million doctor's appointments. I slept. I rested. I chatted with friends online. I set up a dozen promotions. I sent newsletters. I commissioned audiobooks and foreign translations.

I learned that I can get a lot of work done in 4 or 5 hours, and that I simply do not need to babysit some things, and that it's okay to not work 12+ hours every day, 6 days a week. In fact, I learned that that is not the life I even want.

I was forced to take a cold, hard, long look at my capability because of my physical health. I urge you to do the same, even if you don't have any medical conditions preventing you from putting in the 12-hour days.

Figure out what you really want. Then decide if you're even capable of it. It's okay to go, "Nope. That Elana Johnson is insane. Like, legit, needs-to-be-committed insane. I can't do what she does, and I may never reach the level of income she has. And you know what? That's okay."

**I want you to know it's okay**. I want you to stretch for what *you* want to stretch for. Not what *I* think I need to stretch for.

That starts with you evaluating what you're capable of. If that's taking a class and not writing for a month, do it. If that's commissioning the covers and forgoing the ads, do it. If that's reading this book and then setting it aside in favor of a nap, do it.

Do it now!

I will say I wrote a whole book about my writing system and how I work on books. How I track what I write every day. How I fit in outlining and admin tasks. So I'm not going to go into that. I'm going to say that you need a writing system if you want to produce books to a market that could change at any moment.

Sometimes the swings are fast, and sometimes they're slow. Sometimes your body allows you to make those swings, and sometimes you have a bulging disk in your back and the thought of sitting in a swing makes you tear up.

But having a writing system for yourself can help you discover and learn what you're capable of doing.

**Homework:**

1. Take a day and do a personal business evaluation. Answer questions like: What do I want my daily life to look like? What do I want my income to be? How close am I to getting that? How many hours do I work? Is it too many or not enough? How can I rectify the situation if it's not what I want?

What am I capable of physically? Mentally? Emotionally? Spiritually? Financially?

2. Then, give yourself permission to operate within your sphere of capability.

Okay! We have made it through the writing section! Do you feel empowered to level up your craft? Remember, The Four C's are going to help you take your ho-hum stories and turn them into unputdownable books for your readers.

They are:

- Craft
- Characters
- Consistency
- Capability

When those 4 things are worked on and then combined into a book… that's when the magic happens.

I wish to remind you of 2 F-words too…Familiar and Fresh.

Readers want familiar. That's 75% of your job. No twists. No turns. No spins. No spoils.

But they also want something that feels fresh. You can do this with place/location, character traits, jobs, plot points, first kisses, children, animals, and more. But it better be fresh, and then…

Relatable and real, while also being absolutely extraordinary.

No big deal, right? NBD, as one of my romcom characters would say. ;)

I know it's a tall order to write a really fabulous, amazing book. But remember, your book should work harder than you do.

So let's move on to the face of the book. The package readers see first, before they even know you're going to blow them out of the water with your familiar, fresh, real, relatable, absolutely extraordinary story.

## THE PACKAGING OF A BESTSELLER

All right. Maybe you need a breather after that last part. I know I do. It's a lot to take in, and there are some actionable steps to take. If you're like me, you won't have actually done any of the homework, but you'll mull on it for a while and then come back to it.

That's totally fine.

In this part, we're going to talk briefly about the packaging of your bestseller. Remember, at this point, it's a product. You've taken your creativity and you've turned it into something you want to sell.

A few months ago, my daughter and I were going through the multiple boxes of books I have in our basement. I was having her help me do a little inventory, so I knew what paperbacks I had to do for a giveaway.

I pulled out some books, and she goes, "Ew, Mom, I don't like that cover."

She's 16, for those of you who heard that snarky, teenage-girl voice in that sentence. She wasn't really being snarky—I mean, I'd corralled her in the storage room to do paperback inventory with me! She's a wonderful child.

Anyway, I say without missing a beat, "I know. It's not my favorite either. But it sells books."

That's the attitude you need to have. I also want to remind you of one more thing I said earlier: You cannot be married to any part of your packaging. You shouldn't be married to any sentences you write either, but I'll let you get away with that.

This? Being married to your cover because you like it? And maybe your neighbor down the street said she did too? Or maybe your aunt. Your mom. Your hairdresser. "Readers," I've seen people say in various author groups.

"Readers like it," they say.

If readers like it, then why isn't it selling?

Divorce yourself from the cover, title, subtitle, series title, and blurb right now. Even if you paid a lot for any of the above. If you don't, you're not ready for this section yet.

Before I dive in, I will say that I do *not* think every "this book isn't selling" problem can be solved by new packaging. I've recovered, retitled, and relaunched about 50,000 books in my career.

Fine, not that many. (Obviously.) But a lot.

Sometimes, redressing a donkey doesn't hide that it's still a donkey.

Sometimes, redressing a donkey can get more people to pat the donkey and go on to smile at the other donkeys for a little while. But it's not a permanent fix, so it won't last long.

Both of those are okay. I find that it's better for me to admit I have donkeys, keep throwing them some hay or whatever donkeys eat, and pray the market shifts in favor of my donkeys in the future.

But no matter what, I'm not married to any part of my packaging. I'm just not.

I'm going to go through these in order of importance.

**1. Cover** – this is your #1 marketing tool. The cover is the very first thing people see when looking at your product. On the Amazon advertising system, the only thing you get to draw people in is the cover.

You put the cover in other promotional graphics. The cover is the king. He's the boss. If he is off…everything is off.

Now, that said, I've seen a lot of bad covers sell just fine. But a really great cover is going to help convert potential readers into purchasers better, faster, and cheaper.

Your cover should match the market you're trying to enter. Again, this is an area where you don't copy. You can emulate. You can put your cover up among the others in the bestseller list and see if it fits. Having it be the redheaded stepchild is actually bad…

So look at the colors. The fonts. See how the title is arranged. Your two guides here are once again familiar and fresh. It should look like a book that a reader has already read, while being different enough to tell them they haven't yet consumed this delicious morsel.

But if they get this book with one click, they're going to be able to sink into their favorite recliner, tea at the ready, cat purring, and enjoy themselves.

That's what the cover tells them.

I work with a lot of amazing talented cover designers. If you're struggling to find someone like that, look in the resources at the end of this part.

I will say one more thing here—it's absolutely fine to send your cover designer covers that you like that you would like them to look at so they can get an idea of what you want. It's okay to hire the same cover designer as the bestseller in your genre, because they do amazing work there. It's okay to want a cover that fits the genre.

I don't think it's okay to use exact fonts and identical stock photos as that bestseller. That's not fresh, my friends. That's just copying. Copying is not fresh.

Sometimes, it's hard to find stock photos for a genre. I write contemporary cowboys, low steam. Do you know how many clothed

cowboys there are in the stock photography world? About 6. LOL. It's hard to find them.

I'm not saying that you can't ever ever use the same stock photo. I do think your cover designer should be talented enough to make it *look like* it's not the same stock photo. So the cover is to-market and fits with the other contemporary cowboy romances out there, but it's different enough to display your branding and tell readers what they'll get without making them wonder if they've already read the book.

Remember, you're trying to *look-like, sound-like* the bestsellers. You're not trying to *be* the bestsellers.

**2. Title** – the title conveys to the reader immediately what they're going to get. Combined with the cover, these two elements are enough to convince readers to buy. Or they should be.

Titles can hint at why your book is going to be different and more amazing than the others in the genre. It can be fun and playful for romcoms, or dangerous and thrilling for suspense.

I personally like to come up with a nomenclature and stick to that for a series. My romcoms follow the formula of "Just His _____" and they're all workplace romances (trope), fake relationships (trope – and why the "just" is important), grumpy men (trope – and why the "Just His" works), plus-sized heroines (fresh – and drives the cover design), and set in a Southern city (trope – and drives the cover design).

So I spent a long time coming up with different office or workplace scenarios where two people could fall madly in love with one another while breaking conference room windows, dealing with difficult clients, and having an amazing first kiss right there in the office.

Mm-hm. I'll take some more of that, please. Haha!

But that's how I formulate titles. I brainstorm long lists of them and pluck out the best ones that fit a nomenclature, fit the tropes, and then use the cover to hopefully get across all of the above.

**3. Subtitle** – I wouldn't stuff my title full of keywords, unless it makes sense to do so. I do have a couple of series that are just vomiting keywords out. I don't mind them, because they make sense.

Her Cowboy Billionaire Best Friend is one of them. That tells you exactly what the book is going to be, *and* they're keywords. But they actually make a sensical title. I wouldn't just start stuffing every keyword you can think of into the title, subtitle, or series name.

I know this is a temptation, which is why I bring it up here. Remember, all of the words in your book description, the keyword boxes on Amazon, and your actual book are being used as metadata and keywords, so you really really don't need to stuff your title, subtitle, or series name with Cowboy Billionaire Best Friend's Doctor's Older Brother's Second Chance Fake Marriage. You can put those words in the book description and get the same mileage from them.

I do think a good subtitle is appropriate. I usually tell readers what the genre is of the book. So "A sweet contemporary romance" or "A Sweet Romantic Comedy" or some such. Then I get those words in big, bold letters right up by my fantastic, familiar, fresh cover, and we're off to the races.

**4. Series name** – the series name is what we talk about when we're letting readers know we have another book out. This is like the family unit for all of the books, and you don't need to repeat words you've already put in the title or the subtitle. Then you just end up with a lot of "billionaire" or "cowboy" staring them in the face, and it doesn't give them new information.

Every retailer is different, but on Amazon, Apple, Kobo, and Barnes & Noble, you're going to see the title, subtitle, and series name right up by the cover. Right next to it. Right there.

Only on Barnes & Noble do they hide the series name down below the cover and description. The title and subtitle are up top, right beside the

cover. So if you're writing in a series (and you totally are—I should've named this book I Will Hound You to Write in a Series!), you want to be able to talk about that series.

The name is important. For those of us who write multiple series in the same town or world, our readers come to love those places as if they were real. Just putting the town or planet or whatever in the series name can get them to buy, because they know they'll get to take a trip back to one of their favorite places.

And of course, make sure you're doing all of those things to be optimized to come up in searches. I've taken webinars from Apple Books and Amazon, and both of them have robust systems and algorithms that put books in front of readers based on their search optimizations. Hit them. Use the *right* keywords, not just *all* the keywords.

**5. Reviews** – this is how many reviews you have, usually with a star graphic with it filled in for your average star rating. I put this above book description, because it's *riiiiight* up there at the top of the product page by the title, subtitle, and series name.

The only retailer where it's a bit hidden is Kobo—it's down below the book cover instead of to the right where the title et al is.

Ah, so reviews. Believe it or not, readers will make super-snap decisions based on reviews. I think though, that authors put more stock in them than readers do. And you can't count yourself for this one. As an author—a creator—we inherently start looking at reviews across all entertainment, because we think they're so important.

For example, whenever my husband and I are looking for a new movie to watch across the approximately 17 billion streaming services out there (of which we have a subscription to all of them…), he's looking at the movie cover and description, and I go, "Yeah, but…how many reviews? When did it come out? Oooh, it's brand new and has 5000 reviews? It must be so popular and everyone loves it!"

Or I go, “Hmm, suss. It’s been out since 2017 and only has 1200 reviews? This must be a Bad Movie. Not that many people have watched it.” (My son taught me “suss.” I totally use it all the time for suspicious. LOL.)

My husband always looks over at me and says, “But read what it’s about. If we don’t like it, we can turn it off.”

So yeah.

I don’t trust myself as a consumer of entertainment when it comes to reviews. For some reason, becoming an author has transformed me into this Review Diva, where more means better, and certainly more in a shorter amount of time indicates popularity.

Neither is entirely true for the general population of non-authors, and we as authors get stuck in this cycle of fear about our reviews. How many, what stars, etc.

I put this here, simply because it’s at the top of the page. You can’t actually control this part of your packaging. So stop trying. Stop worrying about it. Stop looking at it. Stop reading them.

In my opinion, you need a review. Just one. Then you’re good. The stars are there. It’s populated on the page. Peachy. Move on.

It doesn’t matter how many you have. You just need the stars.

**6. Price point** – this one is right up at the top too. You can choose this, and it can be a deciding factor in your packaging as to whether customers will one-click or keep searching for their next reading escape.

It is right up top on all the retailers, and on Kobo and Amazon, it’ll also list if the book is in Kobo Plus (Kobo’s non-exclusive subscription service) or Kindle Unlimited (which is an exclusive subscription service). Readers make decisions based on this part of your package, so consider it carefully.

There is room in all genres for all price points. I can’t tell you where to price your books. I can tell you how I do it, and that’s by the length of my books.

So I usually—and I say *usually*, because this is not super consistent (oh, boy, here we go. Three stars for this book, because she doesn't even do what she says to do!) across my brand.

Let me sidetrack here—I have two tiers of pricing. One for donkeys, and one for racehorses. That's why it's not super consistent across my brand. I'm not going to raise the prices on my donkeys until I find the Cinderella-Touch and turn them into racehorses. If/When that moment comes, then I'd raise the price too.

Make sense?

So for me, my 50,000-65,000-word books are either $3.99 (donkey price) or $4.99 (racehorse price). Once I hit 75,000 words, that goes to $5.99. Once I hit 90,000 words, I jump to $6.99.

Now, I've decided to be the Tesla of contemporary cowboy romance, and that means I'm a luxury brand. There is room for mid-list brands like Nissan and Honda in a genre. You'd be at $3.99. And there's room for…uh, like, you know, other brands too, at $2.99. I have some of my super loud donkeys at $2.99.

And then there's the super bargain brands at 99¢.

All are fine. 100% fine. You have to decide what you want to be in your brand, deliver that type of reading experience, and price accordingly. I'm going to talk about some discounting and promotional things in the next section on launching, so I'm not going to go into that here. This is just about putting together your book product package, and the price is part of that.

**7. Book description** – this is your cover copy, and this is where you can sell readers if your cover, title, subtitle, series name, or price/subscription service offer hasn't gotten them to click instantly.

I have a whole book on how to write amazing back cover copy, so I'm not going to spend much time talking about it here. I'm going to link to my

book on this in the resources, and there are a great many other resources on how to write killer cover copy.

I will say that I think it's worth you figuring out how to do this yourself. If you're paying someone, that's fine, but it can get costly quickly, and for most of us, we don't need an added expense.

Just think – hook, setup, main conflict, consequence.

Hook the reader in. Set them up as to why the main character is so essential. Introduce the main conflict. State what will happen if the main character can't overcome the conflict.

That drives readers to want to read to find out how in the world this main character they haven't met yet—but would like to—is going to possibly do that.

That's what a good book description should do.

And, if you can sneak in some keywords while you do it, even better—especially on retailers like Apple and Google Play.

**8. Keywords / Categories** – these are things that you put in on the back end of publishing, and they help retailers place your book on lists in their storefronts. Most retailers have some sort of algorithm, and definitely separate lists, so the key here is *accuracy*.

Everyone wins with accuracy.

Labeling your book something it's not? Doesn't help you. Doesn't help readers.

If you're writing a paranormal romance, you should put the book in that category whenever possible. The big, main category should not be science fiction & fantasy, though it probably does fit there further down the line.

But is it the most accurate? Is that really where you want your book shelved? Or do you want it shelved in romance?

If your book is not a mystery, don't put it in any mystery categories. If it's not religious, don't put it in inspirational or religious or Christian categories.

It’s not accurate, and then readers expect one thing from the genre lists —they want familiar, remember—and they get your book expecting things from that genre that are familiar and present in all the other books correctly shelved in that list.

Then you don’t deliver on what they thought they were getting. They might give you a second shot, but they might not.

And if they don’t…you might be out the cost it took to get them there through paid advertising, paid newsletters, energy setting up swaps, or something else.

Accuracy is your friend with keywords and categories. Having the *right* one is better than having the *popular* one.

As a reminder, you can email in to Amazon KDP and ask them to put you in 10 eBooks categories and 10 Books categories for all of their storefronts. I usually just do the US, but you can do all of them. Not all categories exist in all countries/storefronts, so keep that in mind.

Okay, that’s our list of packaging elements! Phew. Lots to think about and make decisions on. Isn’t running a business that sells products so much fun? I actually think it is, and I hope you do too.

If any of the above isn’t working, change it. Remember how you’re not married to anything? Be honest with yourself. Get honest feedback from others in your specific genre. Sometimes a screenshot is all you need to see how you stick out like a whore in church on Sunday, and that your unfamiliar cover that you thought was so amazing…is actually hurting you.

Obviously, titles, subtitles, series names, pricing, and blurbs can be changed much easier than a cover. But if you can’t *give* a book away? You have a problem, Houston. Sometimes that’s a cover, and sometimes that’s a donkey-book that’s simply too unfamiliar in today’s market.

Remember, how you dress up a donkey doesn’t really hide the fact that it’s a donkey. At least not for long. Put him and the rest of his series pals in

the pasture. Put donkey prices on them and let them bray until the market shifts.

If it shifts in your favor, spruce him up, wave the wand, and get him racing.

Man, there's a lot of horse racing metaphors in this book. I should've started with that in the intro. Don't worry, I'll get to fishing in the next part!

Changing a cover, titles, and blurbs can be done throughout the life of a book. Covers are obviously a little bit more time-consuming and costly. And they don't always work. So start with the simple things first to see if they'll move the needle without having to invest more time, money, and energy.

Once you have an idea of what your book will be, what it'll be called, and what tropes you're going to hit, you can then deliver the very best reading experience to the right fans at all levels. Those who already know you. Those who sort of know you that you need to win over with this new, amazing series that checks all the genre expectations on the outside *and* on the inside. And new fans who have never heard of you.

**Note:** I do all of this – all the market research. All the covers. All the tropes. All the titling. All the series stuff. All book length decisions, which drive pricing decisions. All of this section – *before* I write a single word of the first novel in a series.

I usually have all of the covers for the whole series, so I can look at them as I write. That's why I wanted to put this section before the writing one, but I didn't want a mutiny!

**Homework:**

1. Look at your product pages. Do an audit of your catalog and brand. Is there anything that needs to be spruced up?

2. Make a list of those things, and instead of getting overwhelmed and then melting into a sobbing mess (just me? Okay…), put them in their own list, and move one of them to your weekly to-do list. Set a timer for 1 hour on one day that week, and complete that task.

Before you know it, your brand and catalog packaging will be updated!

**Resources:**

- Writing Killer Cover Copy by Elana M. Johnson: https://books2read.com/CoverCopy
- Cover Designer Directory: https://coverdesignerdirectory.com/

## IF YOU HATE MONEY, READ THIS

All right, we're about to embark on an amazing launch journey together. That's not to be confused with a *lunch* journey, and it's a simple A that makes those two things different. I found that out while writing this section, and though it's the first letter of the alphabet, it eluded me many times.

So lunch sounds fantastic, but putting together and living through an amazing launch is even better. You can launch during lunch!

Ahem, anyway. I'm going to take a couple of chapters and go over my system, then I found the easiest way for me to then move through the system was to group everything underneath it's corresponding launch. So instead of having a chapter on how to use your newsletter in all tiers of the launch (the next chapter, don't worry if you don't know the tiers!), there will be a chapter on each tier and how to use each thing inside that tier.

So if you're planning a Medium launch and coming back to the book later, you can go straight to that chapter instead of sifting through 15 chapters to find all the stuff on Medium. That made the most sense in my head, so I hope it makes sense to you too.

First, I want to pause here for a minute. The concept of Write Familiar might be new to you, and the only reason you wouldn't do it is if you hate money.

The concept of not standing out in terms of packaging or plot might be going against everything your creative side wants to do. That's 100% fine—if you hate money.

The idea of moving outside your brand or trying to create a less-than-cohesive brand might excite you, but it leads to…almost no money.

Now, not everyone publishes for money, and if you've ever read any of my other Indie Inspiration books or been in my groups, you know that I advocate for all reasons to publish. Not every single one of them is money. I do think a large percentage of people in my group or reading this book *do* want to make money, so that's why we're pausing here.

Launching is no different. I honestly don't think there are hard and fast rules to launching. I'm going to go through my tiers, because as someone who launches books like it's going to lunch with friends (do you see what I did there? Do you??), I need a strategy that keeps me sane, allows me to sleep, and gives me time to go out with those said friends.

A lot of what I do, I do by feel. I know that's not the answer anyone wants to hear, and I will give you some fairly solid launch plans for each tier. I think each author will have their own goals for every launch, and if you miss a step or don't like doing something?

No problem. This is not one of those times where I'm going to be the voice in your head going, Okay, but…do you hate money?

That's me if you're thinking you might not need to write in a series. Or if you can group everything you want to write under one pen name, which I know is controversial (and there are tactics if you've done this to help yourself deliver the right books to the right readers—it's that familiar accuracy we're going for). Or if you put an alphahole in a clean and wholesome romance. Or a myriad of other things we talked about in the first half of this book.

I used to tell my students that I hoped I was the voice in their head at night, reminding them that they were awesome and that they should type

from homerow position. LOL.

But in all seriousness, I hope I'm the voice in your head, pressing against your mind going, *Don't be afraid to do big, amazing things. You're awesome, even if you don't type from homerow position.*

*Write in series. Study your market and genre. Write amazing, 25% fresh books before you even think about selling them. Wait. Back up. Package your books precisely, and then write that awesome book.*

*Then, let's launch.*

# PART II

# THE LAUNCH TIERS

## HARD, MEDIUM, AND SOFT LAUNCHES

In 2019, I released 42 books. I'm just going to let that sit there for a moment. Take that in.

In 2020, I launched a new pen name and 32 books. I was so proud of myself by that 10-title reduction too.

This book is my 26th launch of 2021. I have 3 more planned and set for preorder, and I launched a new pen name this year too. So perhaps not quite as dramatic of a reduction, but still 10%. And you know what? I'll take my 10% reduction.

The reason I tell you this is not to brag. It's certainly not brag-worthy, and 2019 and a large part of 2020 taught me that more books does not always equal more money. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. I've written an entire book on rapid release (though it's a few years old now), and I honestly believe that mega, massive, multi-million-dollar careers can be built with only a few launches a year.

So if you're looking at those release numbers over the past 3 years and quivering, don't despair. There is no comparison here. There is what you're good at and what you're not, and I am very good at writing fast. It is a muscle I have been working and stretching and improving for 15 years. You don't need to have the same strength as me; you don't need to be me. In fact, you *can't* be me.

I am an outlier, and the fact that I am gives me a unique position on the concept of rapid release, marketing, and how to launch a book.

I literally could not put the same effort into every book I put out, no matter the name. There is not enough money, time, and energy in the world to do that. So a few years ago, I developed a system for myself that would allow me to live a life, work a day job, write more books, *and* launch them into the world with the time, money, and energy available to me.

In one of my rarest genius moments—snort—I labeled them Hard, Medium, and Soft, and well, that stuck. In my head, those make perfect sense, and they give you a good idea of what the launches are just by their names.

A Hard launch is you *coming at this thing*. It's giving the launch nearly everything you've got in terms of time, energy, and money. It starts in preorder and runs through long after the launch.

It's the biggest, longest, most expensive launch tier, with focused goals. I'll go over what types of books you'd apply this launch to in the Hard Launch chapter, but you can think of you gathering together with your closest besties and huddling up. Everyone has their game face on, and you all put your hands in the middle and do some sort of barbaric yalp.

Then there's a simultaneous hand-clap, and everyone turns to get their job done, and done well. That's a Hard launch.

A Medium launch is you taking a break from the misery, er, excitement of a Hard launch, but you're not sleeping through this launch either. This is when you hold back for something bigger later. These types of launches also start in preorder and run through the launch for quite a while. How long on both the Hard and Medium launch is up to you and how much time, money, and energy you have.

If life kicks something at you the way it did me, anything can be modified at any time. I do continuous checks of my productivity, and I adjust things weekly. I do this when I make my weekly to-do list on Friday

or Saturday for the following week. The productivity spreadsheet gets pulled out, and I look at the books I'm working on now, the ones coming next, the launches in the next 30-60 days, and what, if any, plans need to be made, changed, or eliminated.

So just because you assign a launch one tier doesn't mean it needs to *stay* that way.

A Soft launch is you sort of forgetting you have a book releasing that day. You set everything up in advance, sleep late, and sip smoothies well past lunch before you realize your book came out that day.

Even then, you only remember when your bestie texts you to say congrats on another book. Or the Amazon delivery guy shows up with the paperbacks you ordered last week. You get the idea.

This idea of not applying the same tactics to each launch saves money, it saves time, it saves sanity, it allows you to let your well-performing ads keep running longer, and it's catered to a series, because each launch, no matter the level, is building *future* sales and launches.

Each launch tier is designed to do different things and achieve different results. So if you plan a Soft launch, you can't be upset when you get Soft launch results. Right? Now, individual results within the tiers will be wide and varied by individual, genre, distribution, price point, and about 10 other factors you can or can't control. The point is to do the best you can for YOUR launch and go from there.

I think you're going to fall down dead at this next suggestion: Set a goal for each launch. If you're new to this and you underestimate what a Medium launch will do, you'll know for next time. I keep vague launch data, so when I'm planning a Hard one, I know what the last one did and perhaps how this one should perform.

It's that stretch again. I look at what the last one managed to accomplish, and I stretch for something a little better. This can be in any terms you want. Number of reviews. The quality of them. A ranking. An

amount of money made on that very day. Income for the month following. A specific number of sales on Apple, Nook, or Kobo.

A KU bonus in the month the book releases. A certain number of pages by Day 5, Day 15, and Day 30. Whatever. I don't care. What would make you happy? What would be a signal to you that your launch was "successful?" That's your goal.

And it's not what everyone else sees. Your rank can't pay your mortgage or your electric bill. Does it really matter what everyone else sees if you're happy and your launch achieved what you set for a goal?

I submit that it doesn't. Your success is not someone else's. There is so much that goes into the ranking system, most of which we don't even know. If you're still watching rank or using rank to determine your self worth—oops, I mean your success—it's time to stop. If you need permission from someone to stop checking that list, I give it to you now freely.

So those are the launch tiers. In the upcoming chapters, I'm going to talk about several things I do for launching a book and when, including during pre-launch, for a KU-exclusive book or wide book, as well as how I use newsletters, content marketing, paid advertising, and other launch tools for each tier of the launch.

By the way, I'll talk more about "wide books" later. It just means that you'll be publishing your books on more than Amazon, outside of the Kindle Unlimited program.

Each chapter will have a list of ideas for you, hopefully with ideas or tactics you can start applying to your very next launch.

First, I'm going to take a moment to talk about the Big 3—newsletters, content marketing, and paid advertising, since I'm going to be referencing them the most in the next several chapters. Sometimes I talk about things like everyone knows what they are and how to use them, and that might not be the case.

And there's a sheet I made with tactics for preorders, newsletters, paid ads, and launching for each of the tiers - Hard, Medium, and Soft - below.

**Resources:**

- 3-Tiered Launch Strategy - Preorders, Newsletters, Paid Ads, and Launching: http://elanajohnson.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Tiered-Release-Strategy-NEW.pdf

## NEWSLETTERS

An author newsletter is the most valuable tool in an Indie authors toolkit. In my opinion. Whenever I set up a new pen name, preparing a newsletter signup form is among the first things I do. I can get my email right in front of them with a newsletter. I can let them know about sales, deals, new releases, and more with a newsletter. I can reach readers who read on any retailer with a newsletter.

Something to keep in mind: A newsletter is for your readers. It's not for you. I utilize mine in various ways, which have grown and changed over time. In each of the launch tiers, I'll give suggestions for how to use your newsletter, because that's the age-old question, isn't it?

What do I send to my readers?

The answer is simple: Stuff they care about.

Oh-so-vague, right?

But that's part of your job as an Indie—you need to figure out what your readers like. Then you give them more of that. I try to be what I call "surface personal" and share very light details of my life. How I came to creating a character or a place. What I'm excited about in a book that they'll be excited about too. When books will come out. Any delays or unexpected things I didn't plan for in writing or publishing. Where they can find the books, and in what format. (Don't forget to let your readers know when

new formats are available, such as when the book becomes an audiobook or a hardcover, large print, etc.) And why they should care enough to open your emails.

If you give them enough personal and enough of the amazing entertainment they want, they'll open and stay on your newsletter list.

Far too often, I see authors sharing things with readers they shouldn't. They go too far into "author shop talk." Readers don't care about that. They honestly don't. They want to feel like they have a personal connection to you—and you can do that with light details. They don't need nitty gritty—and they want their next great reading experience.

They don't understand what it takes to get on the bestseller lists—and I submit…they don't care. It's not their job to make sure that happens for you.

They don't care about what rank you reached in some storefront. Telling them where your latest release fell in the Kindle store? How is that of any value to them? That's author news. That's something you as an author are excited about—and you should celebrate with other authors, not your readers.

Remember, ***your newsletter is for readers***, and you have 3 types on your list: superfans, lukewarm, and new. Perhaps the superfans will help you reach your goal of attaining the USA Today bestseller title, but the other two are like, "I just want to read an amazing book," or they might not be opening at all, because you're already asking them for something huge when they haven't learned who you are or to trust you yet.

About the only thing I celebrate with my readers is reviews. I don't even tell them the number of them. I'll put in things like, "I'm so glad this book is getting so many great reviews! I'm thrilled so many of you have read it, liked it, and given it 5 stars! Thank you!"

I don't act stunned by it—*of course* I'm going to give them the best reading experience of the year. Right? *Of course* I knew from the beginning

that every reader on the planet would adore this book and rush out to give it 5 stars.

If you act surprised by this, you're telling readers you doubted your ability to deliver to them an amazing book. Don't do that. You don't need to say, "Oh wow! 100 reviews in a week! You guys are the best!"

They don't care how many reviews you have. They really don't. They want to connect over a good book. So you can thank them for liking the book and reviewing the book (which also serves as a reminder for those who haven't read or reviewed to do that…) and you can put in some 5-star reviews to tip the lukewarm and new readers toward buying, reading, and reviewing too.

You can hold a Book Club where you ask them specifically what they liked. Then you're connecting over the book. But it's not about the number of reviews or anything like that. It's about engaging with the reader and getting them to do what you want.

And that's buy, read, review. Buy, read, review. Over and over, because they learn that you're going to be the best author they've got on their eReader.

So be careful about what you're sharing with readers. Is it for them? Or is it for you? Is it reader-talk? Or author-talk?

Make sure it's about them, and for them, and that you're only peeling back a little bit of the film on yourself and what it means to be an author.

## CONTENT MARKETING

Content marketing has the same goal as a newsletter—reaching readers at their level. Superfan, lukewarm fan, or new-to-you reader. They can be in your groups and on your pages. They can be your followers on Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok. It's your job to do the exact same thing you do with your newsletter—post things they care about.

Post things to engage them.

It's not about *you*. It's about *them*.

Now, you can 100% post things that will help you in writing and crafting your next bestseller. You can ask them for names if you've written a million books and can't come up with any more. You can ask them for favorite foods or strange hobbies and give those to characters. You can ask them anything you want—but it's about engaging with *them*.

They like to feel like they're becoming friends with you, and that's the goal of content marketing. I have a personal rule for mine, and it's no more than 1-2 salesy posts per week. I post in my two reader groups and my two author pages 5 days a week, Monday – Friday.

Only 1 or 2 of those posts will be about my books. The others are to engage. They're to talk to readers and find out what they like. Then, I use what they like to sell my books in future social media posts, newsletters, and paid ads.

Content marketing is where you gather the most anecdotal information on your readers. If you pay attention to what they're saying, you can write future books that will fly off the shelves, be easier to sell to all levels of your fans, and give you more content to post on those pages and in your groups.

Outside of posting fun things meant to get them to comment and engage, I use content marketing to tell readers of upcoming books, backlist books, and sales and promotions on my books. I use content marketing to show covers, link to chapters, post a graphic with a teaser on it, and ask them to follow me on other platforms that will send emails for me.

With the things I do once a month, it is not hard to fill my calendar with 5 – 10 posts each month for the promotional things I'm doing that month. Add in a couple of this or that? posts, as well as 2 – 3 "tell me your favorite _____" posts, and half my month is full.

You can post quotes, fun pictures from your vacation (a little slice of life), and anything that gets readers coming to *your* group every day, because they feel like they know you and want to be there.

It's about *them*. It's about building a relationship with them, so they'll spread the word about your books, keep buying your books, and become superfans.

Now, my personal opinion is that content marketing isn't the game-changer when it comes to book sales. If there's a social media platform you don't like, don't use it. I gave up on Instagram and Twitter a long time ago. I use Facebook, because I like it and it's easy. I tried TikTok, and while I liked it okay, it took too much time.

Maybe I'll go back to it—heck, maybe I'll go back to any of them—and maybe I won't. For me, I stick with my Facebook reader group and my newsletter as my two main ways of interacting with my readers, selling them books, and growing my audience on Goodreads, BookBub, and

Amazon specifically. I want readers to follow me in those places, because those 3 places will send emails on my behalf.

## PAID ADVERTISING

Ah, paid advertising. This is a CPC (cost-per-click) system, usually done through Amazon, Facebook, and/or BookBub. I have run extensive ads on all three of those, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. I think they're incredibly valuable to growing audience.

I do not, however, think they are essential. I said this earlier, but so many people have books and courses on marketing and paid ads—myself included! I think there's a lot of fear wrapped up in paid advertising. As in, if you're not doing it, you're doing everything wrong.

I disagree. Not everyone has to run paid ads to make a good living. There are many and varied ways to grow your readership. Paid advertising is one of them.

You can think of paid advertising like fishing. I told you there'd be some fishing metaphors and analogies in this book! Here they are. Paid ads are like you going fishing for new readers.

When you first start, the pond is big and you've never fished there before. You're going to get a lot of people who've never heard of you before. Sometimes you can throw out bait that's not so great, and still get a lot of bites. Catch a lot of fish.

By the way, the bait is your book package. It's not even the book itself. It's just what the book looks like and sounds like. That's why the cover, the title, the blurb, etc. are so important. They're your bait for new readers.

You can get a lot of people to pick up your book simply by the way it looks. But it better be tasty inside, or they won't read on to the next book. You must deliver a delicious fish dinner a few times in a row in order to convert a new fish into a fan.

Always start with the pond closest to your house. This is advertising that goes out to a very tightly targeted audience that lives in a pond where the fish like other bait just like yours. You start there first. You don't just hook on your book and toss it into the biggest, widest ocean you can find.

You start in a small pond. You fish that one for a while, until you think you've caught all the fish you're going to catch there. Then you can move to a bigger lake. The fish in this pond like contemporary romance, but maybe not precisely what you write. Still, you bait up your hook and you toss it in.

If you can deliver the right hook, with the right bait, and then get them to enjoy their catch, they'll become a fan, whether they thought they liked billionaire beach romance or not.

You continue this, expanding in small steps in your audience targeting until you've fished your way through all the ponds and all the lakes. And honestly, I'm not even sure that's possible to do.

I've been doing super high-level ads for four full years, and I still find new readers. There are always going to be readers who haven't heard of me before. If I have a good hook, a good piece of bait, and can deliver a delicious feast inside the book a few times, those fish are mine forever.

That's what paid advertising does. It expands your fanbase one pond at a time. I use it across all launches in various ways, in pre-launch, and as a way to keep my backlist afloat (aha-ha-ha!) for years and years.

I'll talk about this in a later chapter, but your only focus can't be your frontlist. I'm not going to go into huge detail, because this *is* a book about launching, and that implies marketing for frontlist. Paid ads can be used for both backlist and frontlist, and they're an important piece of the pie.

I use Amazon for some things, Facebook for others, and BookBub for still others. I'll discuss them all in the chapters below.

Okay, so those are the Big 3 that will be utilized in each tier of launch. Now that you know what they are, there will be more specifics in the following chapters.

Up first, though, is the pre-launch checklist. So let's get started!

# PART III

# LAUNCHING YOUR BESTSELLER

## PRE-LAUNCH CHECKLIST

Okay, a big deep breath here. If you don't know, I'm a massive proponent of preorders. I adore them with my whole soul, because I love a good deadline and beating it. I feel like I could put on some sort of swimming suit and a mini-tiara and crack my launch whip the way Wonder Woman does. I'm sure that's not a visual you need, but whatever. The words are already there!

If you don't like preorders and they give you a horrible, terrible rash and/or cause weeping and rocking in the fetal position, then for the love of maple bacon doughnuts, don't do them.

If you have a preorder, you should be using some tactics to get it selling before the book actually comes out. The simplest, easiest way is to link to the book coming soon in the back of the one before it. Sometimes that alone is enough to get a massive pre-launch plan going for that book, especially the further along in the series you are.

Stop. Wait a minute. First, we're going to go through a quick preorder checklist, so you can get other things working for you during pre-launch too. Namely Amazon, Apple, BookBub, Goodreads, and other retailers too.

I want to say that even if you don't have a buy link ready for readers, you can still do all of these things, as well as many in the pre-launch ideas for your assigned tier of launch (the next chapter).

These are things I do for a book behind the scenes. I'm sure most authors do all of these things too, to some extent. I need the product ready to sell, and that includes these things:

- Cover / Titles / Blurbs (I put preorders up right here)
- Claim or find book on socials (BookBub, Author Central, Goodreads)
- Gather retail links for my spreadsheet (I do all the retailers the book is on, Goodreads, and BookBub, so I never have to be searching for the links I need. I do this as soon as the book is live on these individual sites)
- Write the fabulous book (I love how this one is a four-word bullet point, as if it's just that easy!)
- Editing / Proofing
- Formatting (I do this about 30 days before the release)
- ARC distribution (I do this about 30 days before the release)
- Category claiming on Amazon (You can only do this once the book is available for sale—I do it the weekend before release. That just happens to fit my system. Do what works for you.)
- Paperbacks (I put my paperback up about a week before the ebook releases)
- Audiobooks (I have never done a simultaneous audiobook and ebook release. If I was going to, I'd make sure I had a narrator who delivered and work with the retailers to make sure the audio is approved on time. One day soon, I'll have more to say about this!)
- Update backmatter of previous book (Day of release)
- Update website (Day of release)

A wide pre-launch is exactly like a KU pre-launch, with some wonderful extras I'll outline in a chapter all its own. I just want to get that out of the way. I get a lot of questions about how they're different, and I'm always like…uh, with wide, you have to include more links and check off a few more things?

Like I'm guessing at it. I'm not sure why there would be any other difference. You're trying to get people to buy your book in pre-launch since the book is not in KU yet. So you include all the same components that will be outlined, and you include the links where the books are available for sale.

Perhaps if you've segmented or tagged your newsletter list so you know who your Nook, Apple, Kobo, Amazon, and Google Play fans are, you could use that data and knowledge in your strategy to get the book into their hands, at the retailer they prefer.

But there's no real difference. You're still going to share and talk about the book the same way. You're still going to have a link for readers. Covers, ARCs, categories, all of it. There will be more strategies shared specifically for wide launches and wide books in general in a couple of chapters.

I do have a post in my Indie Inspiration group about what it means to be in Kindle Unlimited and what it means to be wide that's probably worth a read. I'll put it in the resources for this chapter.

You can do these steps in any order you like, at any time you like. I don't think there's one right way to do it. I don't think there's an optimal time for preorders.

I've done them for the full 12 months. I've done them for 6-8. I've done them for 3-5. I've done them for a few weeks. You'll have to experiment and decide what you like best for your own to-do list and timeline and devise your own strategy for them.

I love having longer preorders up, especially if the series is long, because then I can be pushing the series as well as individual books, and those efforts combined helps me sell more books. For me personally, the optimal time for a preorder is 6-12 months, because it gives me the most wiggle room to try different marketing tactics.

Let's talk about some of those right now!

**Resources:**

- Indie Inspiration post about KU and wide: https://www.facebook.com/groups/IndieInspiration/posts/3508471909262732

## PRE-LAUNCH IN TIERS

Okay, if you have a preorder, there are ways to get people buying it right now. The longer your preorder, the more spread out you can do things. For my longer, 6+ month preorders, I like to do something twice each month until the last month, at which point I'm going to start doubling down my efforts. That means something weekly…or even more often than that.

At least for a Hard launch. If the book is a Medium launch, I'm going to do less. A Soft launch, even less.

Here are some ideas to give you an idea of what a pre-launch would look like on a Hard, Medium, and Soft level. If the item costs money, I'll put $$ behind it.

**Hard:**

**1. Hit newsletter 2 times per month until last month of release.** Then I increase these to at least weekly. For my focus series of the quarter, I put preorders at the bottom of each and every newsletter that goes out.

Some ideas for what you can share in your newsletter about your preorder:

- Videos that inspired a character or plot point.
- Character spotlights.

- Cover progressions.
- Writing updates—remember to keep these reader-focused, not author-talk-focused. Remember, readers don't care about the same things we do.
- Share chapters (see below).
- Pinterest boards with pictures that emulate the book.
- Future covers of books in the series.
- Songs or movies that you've found that embody your characters.
- Recipes for food you've included in the book.
- You're-so-excited messages about something in the book / finishing the book. Keep things positive and reader-focused. What will *they* like about it? What are you excited for *them* to read?

**2. Post chapters in newsletter or on your website.** You can start sharing these as early as you have them ready. I like to send people *to* my website *from* my newsletter, because I have a Facebook pixel embedded on my site, and I can gather that data to make audiences for future ads.

I also use my pages and groups to tell people to join my newsletter so they can get the sneak peeks that go up on my website. See how the things we do all work together in tandem? Content marketing leads to newsletter, which leads to the website, where I get ads data, and then get more people into my books with the ads. Then those people read, join my groups, follow me on social media, and the cycle starts over again.

Never assume that because someone is on your newsletter or in your groups that they know everything about where you are, where they should be to get deals, etc. Remind them consistently—I do about once/month.

**3. Content marketing in groups, on pages, or your preferred social media.** I start doing this the moment the book is live, and I make sure to

include it at least once/month for the duration of the preorder until the last month. Then I up the ante.

Anything you're including in your newsletter, you can adapt for content marketing. Maybe you wouldn't share a whole chapter, for example, but a couple of the most enticing sentences.

But links to videos and songs? Those can go on social media and in groups too. Those snazzy graphics you can make in BookBrush, Canva, or PicMonkey? Include those too! Posting the cover and commenting on it? Content marketing.

Character sketches. Research you've had to do—I once went to goat yoga for a book, and that was a huge hit with my reader group *and* my newsletter! Basically, anything you do to research, outline, write, or include in the book can be shared with readers in a fun, engaging, get-them-excited way to preorder and read the book the moment it comes out is content marketing and newsletter gold.

Not only that, but it provides a glimpse at who you are, and readers start to feel like they know you.

Another idea that goes along with this one, especially for those of us who run long preorders, with high wait-times between books, is to discount the preorder for an extremely limited time to get it to take off quickly.

To be completely transparent, I have done this exactly one time, but the results were phenomenal for me. I've been experimenting with longer preorders and different tactics to see how my readers respond to them and what I can get them excited about on which retailers.

The one I've been doing is a KU series, so the books are only on Amazon. When Book 1 came out, I had Book 2 on preorder for 6 months later. Before Book 2 came out, I put Book 3 on preorder, and I devised a couple of things to grow the readership for this specific series.

1. I know this series is directly tied to another one. Book 1 is the son of the hero in a previous series' Book 3. That series is 5 books. So for the full

6 months after Book 1 came out, I started pushing Book 1 of the *other* series.

It's a series of 5 brothers, so 5 books, and at the end of that complete Book 5, I push readers to the new Book 1—the son of Book 3's hero. Does this even make sense??

Anyway, that's what I did for that full 6 months. So that Book 1 acted as a Book 6, and I had the most preorders on Book 2 (or is it 7??) that I've ever had on any of my preorders.

2. 10 days before the launch of Book 2, I ran a 99¢ Weekend Deal on Book 1 for 2 days. Friday and Saturday only, and I booked 5 ads and sent to my newsletter both days. That way, I can warm up lukewarm readers as well as get new readers into this new series before they're too far behind.

3. Book 2 released on a Tuesday, and I set Book 3—the preorder—to half price for two days only. My books are long, and I price them at $5.99, so half price is $2.99 and still within the 70% royalty rate.

At this point, the preorder had been up for maybe 5 days, and I hadn't mentioned it to anyone. I had maybe 25 preorders that would then get bumped from the higher $5.99 price point to the lower $2.99 one, because that's what Amazon does. If you lower your preorder price during preorder, everyone who's preordered it at a higher price gets it for the lowest price.

After that? The higher price takes over again as long as you don't lower it again.

So Book 3 was $2.99 for two days—release day of Book 2 and the following day. I emailed both days—which gives me a chance to hit the new release twice in a row too!—and I sold over 800 copies in 2 days.

Yes, it's a lower price point. But that was a huge amount of sales for a preorder that doesn't come out for another 6 months, and my book shot up in visibility for several weeks after that.

Of course, Book 2 was now out, with a teaser of Book 3, but it's well on its way to becoming my bestselling preorder, even over Book 2's numbers.

I gave it a huge boost upon the release of Book 2. That was a new tactic I'd never done before, and I just wanted to see how my fans would react.

For the wide authors reading, I've been doing a wide preorder and launch, then moving into KU for one of my women's fiction series. I have sent several emails with buttons for all of the retailers, and I tag the people clicking on the Apple button as Apple readers. Nook as Nook readers. Etc.

Then, I send emails specifically to those groups of people about the preorder being on Apple, Nook, Kobo, and Google Play. I remind them to buy in preorder, because the book won't be live on those storefronts forever.

You can absolutely still do this without the language about it not being available forever. I find attaching some sort of time limitation to it works well for me, and since I've been doing these types of launches for the last 2 books, that's what I've been doing.

I provide a specific retailer link just for that retailer—so the Apple email goes out to Apple readers, with only the Apple link. Same for Nook and the others. Once the book is live, I send one email to everyone with all of the links separated out, usually with a button that has a Books2Read link with all the available retailers on that landing page.

You could use your website as a landing page as well, and get that Facebook pixel data, newsletter pop-up, etc. You can use that in your posts as well—this single landing page. Or Apple-branded graphics with an Apple link.

Not every link has to be included in every post. So branch out and make sure people know where they can buy the book, always with the aim of providing good content readers are interested in.

**4. Send BookBub preorder alert ($$).** The cost of these depends on how many US followers you have. Your price point also plays a factor in whether or not you'll make a profit on these. I almost always do for Liz Isaacson, but a couple of my other names are a bit iffy. For Liz, I like sending them 2 days before release. She always releases on a Tuesday, and

that means a Sunday email from BookBub. That's my highest reading day of the week, and I have a lot of people in their emails and opening newsletters on Sunday, so this works for me.

You might have to experiment a little to see what works for you.

**5. Run sales on previous books in series *before* the launch ($$).** When you're prepping for a Hard launch of a non-Book 1 in a series, running a sale on Book 1 in the series 2-4 weeks before the launch of your Hard launch (and I'll give you some sample launch plans later) can bring new readers into the series while it's still releasing and make your Book 4, 5, 6 Hard launch all the better.

I've said this plenty of times—on podcasts, at conferences, and in my group—but I think the best method for discounting books is in tiers too.

Big surprise there!

You basically have several price points for deals, and you want to utilize all of them. There are four I take advantage of.

1. Full price. You can run ads to full-price books on any platform.

2. Half-off or 40% off sale. A lot of authors skip over this step down and go straight to 99¢. But if you price at $5.99, $2.99 is half-price.

A $4.99 book to $2.99 is 40% off. Most people understand half-price sales and %-off sales. Why not take advantage of this step as you move through a series? And again later, in the year following the completion of your series?

Maybe you have a reason why, but I don't, so I do it.

3. 99¢. If you're in KU, setting these up with a Kindle Countdown Deal earns you twice as much.

4. And the big daddy of them all—free. If you go from full-price to free, even for a day, you've just shot yourself in the foot. You've skipped over two other sales that get people into your books too, all while you make money. Save free for the biggest, baddest, best sale on your series.

Or if BookBub gives you a Featured Deal for it. (But *you're* the one applying for those, so…you control this.)

So if I have a long series, with say 3 or 4 Hard launches in it, I would use all of the price points in succession throughout the release of the series to continually bring people into my active series (and thus, my backlist), saving the big, free Book 1 for my Hardest release.

6. Run preorder ads (AMS at minimum) ($$). I like to put the whole series in an auto ad and set a budget I can live with without having to babysit the dashboard. When a book releases, I turn it off, so that auto ad is only preorders, and I'm not concerned with looking for or waiting for KU pages to be attributed to the ad.

I also use this ad's data to form lists of keywords or product ASINs for other campaigns for the books in the series as they prepare to launch. Once the last book has launched, it should be the only book left in this ad, and you can keep it running too!

I rarely run Facebook or BookBub ads on preorders. They're just too expensive and don't yield great results for me personally, across any of my names.

All right. Deep breath. I know that's a lot of information for a pre-launch section, Hard release. The good thing is, for Medium and Soft, you just take things down a notch. So all of the above gets modified for those launches. You do less, so I'll go through them quickly, without the long explanations.

**Medium:**

**1. Hit newsletter 1-2 times/month.**

**2. Send BookBub preorder alert ($$) about 3 weeks before release.** This brings in preorders further from the release date of the book, which can bump up your visibility as you near the launch.

**3. Content marketing on social media / groups 2/times month.**

**4. Run sales on previous books in series *at launch* ($$).** In a Hard launch, we do it before the release. In a Medium launch, you do it *over release day*. So a sale in a Medium launch would be Book 1 at say, half-price, and it lasts from Monday – Thursday, where Tuesday in there is the release day of your Medium launch.

**5. Run ads on Day -3 of launch (AMS at minimum) ($$).** I like to start these a few days before the launch so they're well up and running by the launch day. AMS approves pretty fast, but Facebook has taken a full 24 hours for me before.

**Soft:**

**1. Have books at the bottom of your newsletter for preorder – no real special attention given.** OR you could mention it once/month if you have really good content and have the time and energy to come up with the content.

**2. Mention on social media once/month.** This can be as simple as saying, "Have you seen the third book in the Shiloh Ridge Ranch series is up for preorder? Isn't the cover fantastic? [link]"

**3. Start ads the following week ($$).** Upon the launch of a Soft book, I turn off the book in the auto ad, *aaaand*…I don't do much of anything else. Maybe I'll set up a new auto ad for just that book if I feel like it? Maybe. If I have an amazing FB audience that works really well on my series, I'll probably take the time and energy to make a couple of graphics and put up a Facebook ad on it. Low spend, because my budget in a Soft launch is low (I'll have a chapter about budgets for each tier later in the book).

Sometimes I start the ads the day of, sometimes not until the following week. Sometimes not at all, to be honest. It just depends on my workload and how hard I want to work for this Soft launch.

**Note:** On a soft launch, you're counting on your previous Medium and Hard launches to sell-through to this book. *Those* launches sell *this* book, because as we've heard a gajillion times now, the books should be working harder than we are. So let the work you've put into earlier books and earlier launches, well, do their job.

**Another Important Note:** Every single thing you do should accomplish at least 1 of the following 3 things. The more the better.

1. Expand fanbase
2. Earn you more money
3. Make future launches bigger and better

Not every tactic requires money, but they *will* require something from you. Either time, energy, or money. Sometimes just one. Sometimes two. Sometimes all three. So in the following chapters, I'm going to give you some Top 5 lists to help you with tactics that either will or won't require money, time, or energy.

Starting…now!

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have $50:**

1. Take your bestselling series and put them all into a group auto ad on Amazon. Set it for $1/day and commit not to turning it off for 30 days. Every 10 days, login and check the ad. If it's not serving, increase the bid by a nickel. Come back in 10 days. Repeat until the ad starts serving.

Then, 30 days after it's started serving, go back in and check the ad to see how it's doing. Mine keywords from it for future ads. Negate anything that's not working but using money. If it's profitable, keep it running as long as you can afford it.

2. Run a free promotion over a weekend or as part of another tactic you like. Arrange newsletter swaps with at least 6 people for the sale and book My Book Cave if you can get it. With an Editor's Pick there, it's $49.

3. Buy 3 books on craft and get studying.

4. Do a paperback giveaway. Just 1. One book to buy, one book to ship. Advertise it to your newsletter and groups. To make this one even better for growing your infrastructure, have them join something to be able to enter. Get on your newsletter. Join your reader group, follow you somewhere you're trying to build followers, etc.

5. Polish up your product pages by studying blurbs—there are plenty of Indies out there with books on how to do it, myself included!—or other authors' titles and subtitles. Try to increase your reviews by sending out ARCs through StoryOrigin, BookFunnel, Prolific Works or BookSprout.

## WIDE LAUNCHES

All right, this chapter is dedicated to those of us who launch our books on multiple retailers. I've done this lots of times, and to me, there's no real difference. I'm still going to be doing all of the pre-launch things assigned to the tier I've given the book. The pre-launch is all about selling—there are no pages—so the things listed there are for any book, KU or wide.

Launching is a bit of a different beast. You want to be able to reach readers and get them over to their preferred retailers upon a launch, and you want to do it quickly.

I always compile my links in a spreadsheet. So I have each individual retailer link, then a universal link, then any other links I need—paperback, hardcover, Overdrive, etc.

My goal with a wide launch is to get a reader from wherever they are—on a social media platform, in their email, in my reader group—and to their preferred retailer instantly. I typically don't use a universal link, unless I'm doing paid ads for the launch. So in the next few chapters, where we go through all the launch tiers, when I'm talking about newsletters, content marketing, paid ads, and other resources to launch, you as a wide author get to decide how to do that.

Will you use a universal link? A landing page on your website? Individual links for individual buttons, words, or posts? Sometimes running a Facebook ad to your highest-earning retailer with just their link can make your launch even better than before. If that's Barnes & Noble, just use the B&N link. No one ever said you have to do everything just because your book is everywhere.

For me, I sell the most of my Elana Johnson beach books on Apple. My marketing efforts are best spent in getting people to Amazon or Apple, and that's what I do. Because time, money, and energy are so limited, I'm going to focus on what's worked the best in the past, and what will hopefully earn me the highest ROI moving forward.

So you need to know where you're selling books. I do this in a spreadsheet, every single month, because spreadsheets do math for me. They tell me what percentage of my income comes from KU for each name. They tell me what percentage of income comes from Apple, B&N, Kobo, Google Play, Draft2Digital, Findaway Voices, and Audible each month, per name.

I do the work of pulling it from every retailer every single month.

So I know that Apple has been the highest earning retailer for my 5 wide Elana series for about half the months of 2021. Surprisingly, Draft2Digital is #3. I'm selling in libraries better than Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Google Play.

So I use that information to drive my marketing efforts. Apple readers like my books? Great, let's get more Apple readers! That's the closest pond to me. It's going to be fished first. In the future, if I want to increase my Nook earnings, I could start to do some ads or content marketing specifically for Nook.

But right now, I'm focused on Apple, because it's impossible to focus on everything. I think that's one mistake wide authors make—I know I did.

I tried to build and grow everything, everywhere, simultaneously. And it's hard, and slow, and I couldn't do it.

If you don't know where your money is coming from, I urge you to find out. Then focus on fishing more in the ponds where you're already doing well. Build those up first, then expand to new rivers and lakes.

**Other things to think about:**

Retailer exclusive preorders: Don't put the book up on Amazon. Only put it on the wide retailers. Advertise it for 6 months before adding it to Amazon. Then make that a big deal too. Gives you more to talk about, more to post about, and basically two big pre-launch activities.

Use Facebook and BookBub over Amazon in your paid advertising arsenal. BookBub is especially amazing for wide books on a permafree price point. You can put in all the links, not only to the US stores on all the retailers, but to Amazon and Kobo and Apple UK, AU, CA, etc. I do a low-and-slow method with my permafree titles. I set a $2-3/day budget, and I test images and authors until I have a few that work. Then I run one of those for a month. Switch to a different image and author, run it for a month, switch again.

So for $100/month, I'm continually driving new readers into my permafree, into my brand, and hooking more and more readers. In fact, with BookBub, you don't have to use an Amazon link at all. So if you're trying to get more Apple readers? Just use an Apple link. BookBub is by far the best way to do paid ads to the non-Zon retailers.

Facebook is good too, but again, the targeting and images have to be tested, and the budgets low, as the audiences aren't as big. That's okay. The

low and slow burn of bringing people into your work, delivering on your promise, and securing them in your fanbase is a solid strategy that works.

Another idea is to do non-Zon boxed sets, exclusive only to the other retailers. Not only can you price higher, but you can drive people to those retailers to get the exclusive set. You can do a launch for these sets without mentioning Amazon at all—because the set is not on Amazon. Sometimes wide readers feel left out of exclusives and deals, so why not give them some?

If you make money on Nook, do a 99¢ sale *only* on Nook, and *only* for Nook readers. Just because you're not exclusive to a retailer doesn't mean you can't tailor some exclusive sales for the readers of your biggest platform and make them feel special. If people ask when the sale will be coming to Apple or Kobo, tell them you have something juicy for them coming up and hey, be sure to open your emails from me when you get them!

When you're doing promotions, be sure to book paid newsletters who include more than Amazon links. Sometimes the ones that don't have those boxes will still do it if you tell them your books are widely available. I've done that on Robin Reads and eReader News Today, and they've sent out more than my Amazon link for the promotion.

The people running those promotions are exactly that—people. They want to sell books too, so be professional and kind in your emails to them, and see if they'll include more than the Amazon link.

Consistently check the retailer promotional dashboards for anything that aligns with your release. If there isn't anything, consider emailing in to ask if there's anything that retailer can do to help you with the launch of your new release.

This is where conferencing comes in. I've been going to conferences for over a decade. It wasn't until the last 2 – 3 years that I decided to go to the trade show. You know, where all the people who do things for authors congregate? That terrified me to no end. I don't know what to say to the guy who invented Vellum. Or Draft2Digital. Or Findaway Voices.

And talking to someone who runs merchandising and promotional opportunities at Barnes & Noble? I might as well have turned myself into a pile of goo. No, thanks.

But in the past few years, I've gotten over myself, and I go to the trade show. If there's someone there from Amazon, I go talk to them. I set up the meetings with Kobo, Apple, Nook, Findaway Voices, and more. I talk to them. I ask them questions about their platform. I find out how I can sell more books within their existing system.

And then guess what? I have those contacts, so should I have a big release I'm planning, I can email them and start talking again. They want to help us sell books on their platform. That part isn't a mystery.

Why I took so long to start talking to them is. If you haven't made that leap yet, please consider it for the next conference you attend. These industry professionals almost always have meetings—one-on-one meetings where it's just you and them—and the information you get is valuable, as is the contact with that person.

One last one I hope doesn't offend my wide brothers and sisters… Stop making excuses. Stop saying that the strategies are different for KU authors vs. wide authors. I don't think that's true, and I've released in both arenas

for years. I understand on a personal level what it takes to launch a wide book and a KU book. I know what that back end looks like. I know the hours of uploading and linking and sending newsletters and building fanbase.

The strategies for the Big 3—newsletters, content marketing, and paid advertising—don't rely on anything but you. Fine, they rely on the amazing quality of your book too. But whether that book is available only on Amazon or not does not play into the tactic.

It's your job to know where you sell books now, and where you'd like to grow. Then to look at the Hard launch list and adapt it to any retailer you see fit. For example, I already do well on Apple with my newly wide backlist, so for my first-ever wide launch for Elana next summer, I've already contacted them about the launch.

I've got 3 books up for preorder (at the time of this writing), and I'll be doing 3 exclusive Apple preorders in the coming months.

I've already talked to B&N about doing a virtual Zoom launch for the series. I don't sell these books well on Nook, and I want to do better. How can I do that? What do readers want? These types of virtual launches have done really well for other authors at B&N, so that could be a great way to get exposure for my not-selling-well books over there.

I mentioned my book to Kobo as well, and we're talking about what types of lists it could be included in come next summer.

We're talking already—a full 8 months out from release. I couldn't do that without the contacts I've made over the years. I couldn't do that without knowing where I already sell and where I'd like to sell more. I couldn't do that without taking risks and treating this next launch of mine (which is a Hard launch, BTW) as more than just on Amazon.

I'm not saying any of you do this, but I'm not making excuses for why it's harder to sell on the non-Zon platforms. Yes, it's harder, because Amazon is huge. But harder doesn't mean impossible, and it also doesn't

mean that the strategies and tactics are wildly different, *especially* in pre-launch.

Okay, I'm done and off the soapbox now. Excuses just make everything harder, and the moment we dismiss them from our minds, new paths emerge. Launching a book is hard no matter what, so you have to be creative and smart when doing it wide. You don't have *time* for excuses!

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have $150:**

1. Set up a $5/day Amazon auto ad on Book 1 in your bestselling series. Let it do its thing for 20 days and then check it. See if there's anything you can learn, and turn off things that are eating money and not earning sales/pages. Keep it running for as long as it's profitable and you can afford it.

2. Set up a $3/day BookBub ad on a permafree Book 1. You'll know after 3 days (1000 impressions) if the author target you chose is working. If not, pause the ad, choose someone else, and repeat.

3. When running a 99¢ sale on your Book 1 for a Hard or Medium later-in-series launch, book Robin Reads, Book of the Day if possible. It's $85.

4. Join BookFunnel or StoryOrigin at the paid level and start joining newsletter swaps and promotions to grow your list.

5. Set up a promotion for a free or 99¢ backlist book that feeds an entire series and arrange newsletter swaps, pay for some newsletter spots, and set up an Amazon ad for the other books in the series and target the one that will be on sale.

## LAUNCH PLAN RESOURCES

I decided to put this chapter here, before the big ones on Hard, Medium, and Soft, so I could include these extraneous tactics in those sections and you'd know what they meant. So those specific chapters are coming next!

I'm going to be exploring the Big 3 for the tiers: Newsletters, content marketing, and paid advertising. Then, there's other things you can do for the different launch tiers, and they include but are not limited to:

- Texting Club – this is where you gather people's phone numbers the very same way you collect their email addresses. There are a couple of services for this. I use Project Broadcast and EZ Texting. And bonus—these people can read on any app on their phone! So wide authors? There's no barrier here for you.
- Newsletter swaps – you put a like-author's book in your newsletter; they put yours in theirs. I mentioned these earlier, and in case you didn't know what they were, now you do.
- Messenger groups – this is similar to a newsletter or a texting club. People sign up to join your Messenger group. I used to have one of these, but the rules have changed so much and so often, that I don't use it anymore.

- Facebook groups / Takeovers – doing a couple of hours of chatting, videos, posts, and giveaways in someone else's reader group, a specifically themed group, or your own reader group. Wide authors—throw a Nook-specific party! Or an Apple Beach Bash! Think outside the box here. Perhaps if these types of events do really well for you, you'll schedule 3 – 4 of them and do a different retailer for each one…
- Giveaways – there are tiers of these… LOL. I'm so sorry. I do tiers for everything, obviously! There are complex giveaways that I only do on Hard launches, and easy giveaways I can do any old time I want.
- One of my favorite things to do is buy 5-10 of my own book when it's on sale for 99¢. You click the "Buy for Others" button over below the buy buttons on Amazon, and then you have a code and a link to give to a reader in the US. Yes, only the US, so keep that in mind.
- For a Soft launch, you can give away 5 copies of your Book 1, and it only costs you $5 and takes a couple of emails to distribute the prize. No trip to the post office. No shipping cost. No extra gifts, like candles or things that go with your books.
- Other things I've done are digital cookbooks—this would be what I might give away in a Medium launch. Again, not something that costs me a lot of money, but might cost me some time and energy. Maybe a lot of it. That's what the tiers are. Soft launch giveaways are easy. Medium ones take a little bit more. Hard giveaways require some money, gathering, and trips outside the house (ew…), thus making them, well, harder.
- Wide authors – do giveaways that reward readers on their retailer. A Nook eReader, one of your books on Apple, etc. Not everything is about Amazon, and you can have different prize

packages for different groups of people. Expand your thinking and cater to those who've already read, and in areas you want to grow.

- Live events (video readings, for example) – There are plenty of places for video content these days. Instagram Reels, TikTok, and Facebook lives are all gobbled up by readers in certain genres. Your personal level of comfort for these types of events will determine if this is a Soft, Medium, or Hard launch idea for you.
- For me, it's hard, therefore, I may or may not do these things for a Hard release.
- Book Clubs – This is something I would do either for the first book in a series as later books release, or for the book that just came out as part of the launch plan. I run it digitally, in my group, just like I would an in-person book club.
- I tell my group what book we're going to read, and when the discussion will be. Then I plan 5-7 posts designed to interact with readers, learn more about what they like, what they don't like, which helps me inform future heroes, plots, and series ideas…
- I give away a lot of prizes, so this costs me some money and effort, as well as a trip out of the house, so I label this as a Hard launch activity. But again, if you adore this type of thing, perhaps it would be something you do on a Medium launch.

There are a multitude of other things you can do to interact with readers when you have new releases, or even for older books. These are just a few that I have experience with, and you'll see them in the "Other" section in

the following 3 chapters, which will outline which tactics I've categorized in each launch tier.

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have more TIME and/or ENERGY than MONEY:**

1. Make a Facebook post with a stunning graphic (which you have to spend time and energy making too) and the buy link(s). Then ask the people in your group to share it.

2. Do the same for Instagram, TikTok, whatever that gets the word out about your book. Encourage shares with a very simple giveaway of a 99¢ book or boxed set (see the Soft launch chapter for details on this tactic).

3. Newsletter swaps with authors in your genre.

4. Facebook group takeovers, Book Clubs, videos, etc. where you interact with fans, new and old. Apply to other social media platforms, such as Instagram Reels and TikTok videos, blog posts, or Twitter parties. Whatever fits your genre and allows you to interact with fans in an authentic way. Remember to be sure to choose the platforms that you like creating content for! Then it's just time and energy, but it's spent doing something you like, not something that makes you cringe.

5. Create an amazing automation sequence (also called a drip campaign) for your newsletter. Make sure you include enough emails to showcase one of your complete series every 3rd email. Then join a BookFunnel, StoryOrigin, Prolific Works, or other group promotions to grow your list.

## THE HARD LAUNCH

All right. This chapter is going to be The Big One. Remember that from here, you simply scale back for a Medium launch and then plan an even further retreat for a Soft.

I think it's important to choose activities that you enjoy doing. This is in no way a comprehensive list of things you absolutely must do no matter what in order to find success. I don't think there's a checklist alive like that, because no one can guarantee success if you just put up one more post or spend fifty more bucks. You know?

So we'll go through the 3 I use for every launch, and then there's that Other category I've already mentioned.

**Newsletter:**

Hit in one day. Send to your whole list. There is only one call-to-action, and that's to buy the book. There are no swaps in this email. There are no personal stories—unless they're less than 100 words. This is a buy-the-book email.

**Alternately** – you can segment the NL and send 3 times – AM / PM / following day AM.

**OR** – you can segment the NL and send 3 times – AM Day 1 // mid-day Day 2 // evening Day 3.

Plan a swap or a sale for the next day / few days later. This allows you to send out your newsletter again, with your new release right there at the top. The swap book or sale, then bam! Your new release! *Did you miss it? Buy today!*

Send to unopens 5 days after launch. I'd include some reviews here as further fuel to get them to buy. If you've bought author copy paperbacks, you can take a picture of yourself with it with your shiny smile as an extra way to connect with them and how this book is going to be their next big reading escape.

One week out: Send NL with reviews from the book. This serves as a reminder for anyone who's missed the previous emails, as well as a call-to-review for those who got the book and read it. For anyone who bought the book but hasn't read it yet (scandal!), this email can remind them they better get reading!

Two weeks out: Do a launch giveaway. This allows you to once again send an email about the book (further reminders! Read now! Review if you've read! Don't forget about this awesome book—and if you have the next on preorder? Mention that here too!) disguised behind the giveaway.

These can be retailer-specific or all-in-one's. If you have people tap a button for where they buy to be entered to win, you can say that anyone who buys and reads on Nook will be entered to win a Nook-Book exclusive boxed set or a Nook eReader or whatever you're giving away for the Nook-specific giveaway.

Then, you have the information for who buys on Nook for future newsletter campaigns and can more closely target those readers when you have a Nook-only sale, a Nook-only preorder, or want to increase your sales on Nook. Right?

Keep in your newsletter with every send for the next couple of months or until the next release. I put this at the bottom of my email, with the cover and a brief, enticing tagline, with a buy button.

**Content Marketing:**

Teasers – choose the very best lines from your book and make graphics with the text on them. These should be short and quick, pithy and enticing. Something a reader can glance at and read without even knowing they're doing it.

Graphics – include the cover, the price, if the book is in KU or if it's on all the retailers, and something about how it's new and they should get it now.

Character spotlights – you can write your newsletter from the POV of one of your characters. I've done this a few times, and my readers really like it. Or you can use stock photos and put those up in your groups with a little sketch about the character and what makes them tick.

Excerpts – this is a glorified version of the teaser. It's a longer section that I would post in text only, perhaps with a graphic with all the book details as

outlined above, then the buy links.

Chapter shares – I host these on my website and drive people to read them in preorder as well as through launch and well into post-launch. Whenever I want, really, because they're on my website now. I can pull them out whenever I want to try to bring in new readers.

Pinterest boards – pin food, pictures of your character, places they visit, clothes they'd wear, and your book covers to a book-specific board and share it with readers. Invite them to pin things too.

Videos on Reels, Facebook Live, or TikTok – These can be formal chats with you, Q&A's, or just fun videos of your book out in the wild. Or digitally. Or whatever works for you! You can use this video content before launch, at launch, and well into post-launch. Anytime!

Remember, these can feature all of the links for wide books, or wide authors can tailor these to go to a specific retailer for a specific audience.

**Paid Ads:**

Preorder ads on AMS (could do FB, depending on budget and how much money you don't mind burning. LOL.) that start at least 30 days out from release.

AMS / FB ads on Day -5 of launch, using new-to-you audiences as well as tried-and-true performing audiences. If this is a Book 1, continue these ads

indefinitely. If it's a later-in-series release, continue ads as long as they are profitable or until the next release in the series.

Think outside series, but target your best performing books with very-closely-matched titles. So let's imagine a scenario where you have a series that has sold well. You want to capitalize on that, and you've written another series of books that are very much like that one.

For my Hard launch, I'd target just those books with my preorders and new releases. Then, I'd take one step away from myself to the biggest author who has books almost exactly like mine. I'd put all of the books in my newly releasing series in a group ad on Amazon and target their top 5 books by the ASIN, as well as by the title, the series title, and the author name.

Then, I'd put together a group of books that have similar themes as the new release and put those together in an ad targeting only that new release. And vice versa. The new release is the only book in an ad targeting these other books that have similar themes, no matter how they've sold.

Think outside the series boundaries to your whole catalog and group books in themes—all second chance tropes, for example—and group them together.

On these types of ads, for a Hard launch, you're going to set the bid higher than normal to be aggressive and flood the product pages with your books, with a budget that's aggressive too.

The goal here is to train Amazon faster, and then start to pull back on the bid until you get it to the place where it's in equilibrium. It spends and it serves and it wins and you're selling books for the lowest CPC. That's equilibrium.

This type of Hard launch advertising requires babysitting, so don't do this unless you can check your ads every 3 – 4 days. Within 3 weeks, you should have an ad that's fairly well trained that you can then lower the

budget on for an evergreen ad that will serve and sell for a while after release. Or before. Or during.

No matter what, get outside the box. Your goal in these types of group ads is to be on the *outside edge* of the box, not inside it in any way.

**Other:**

- Facebook takeovers
- Book Clubs
- Live events
- Giveaways which require mailing physical things
- Texting / Messenger Clubs

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have more MONEY than TIME or ENERGY:**

1. Ads on multiple platforms, for more than the first book in a series.

2. Higher ad spends on all releases, which can include multiple Facebook ads across numerous audiences, BookBub ads (yes, they work for new releases – target yourself all day and all night!), and a myriad of Amazon Ads. There's auto, suggested keywords, culled keywords, categories, and ASINs. The possibilities are endless!

Try grouping books in a way you haven't before on Amazon, as outlined in this chapter, making 4 – 6 ads with higher bids and a bigger budget.

3. More elaborate giveaways—not just ebooks, but paperbacks, candles, whatever appeals to the readers in your genre. Put together book-specific packages and pick winners during release week or month. Then mail

everything out with a personalized note, encouraging them to share their books/prizes when they get them.

4. Backlist sales on books that lead to the new release, with paid ads as well as paid newsletter spots, before, during, and after the release.

5. Goodreads paperback or ebook giveaway.

## THE MEDIUM LAUNCH

**Newsletters:**

- Segment into 3; send at different times, 3 days in a row (AM Day 1 / PM Day 2 / Noon Day 3)
- **Alternately** – segment into 3 and send over the course of 2 days – AM Day 1 // PM Day 1 // Noon Day 2
- "Weekend Sale" with a book that's VERY close to the one you just released – feature them side-by-side – send on Day 4
- Add to bottom of your newsletter as a reminder until the next release
- Continually talk about it in emails until the next book in the series

**Content Marketing:**

- Graphics
- Preorder shares

- Chapters (possibly)

**Paid Ads:**

- Preorder GROUP ads
- AMS / FB ads on Day 3 - 7 of launch – lower budget
- Continue as budget allows until next release

**Other:**

- Texting / Messenger Club
- Increased social media
- Move down some Hard launch tactics

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have $500:**

1. Choose a book that usually sells decently at full price. Perhaps this is a book that did great when it came out, but it could use a wider fishing net to bring in new readers. Create 6 – 10 images for a Facebook ad, and test the images on 3 separate audiences that are a single step away from your main, tight target. Set the ads at $20/day and come back after 3 days to learn which images and which audiences work the best. That's $180 to learn what's clicky for those audiences and this information will inform future ads for that audience.

If the ads are working, you can continue them as-is, or lower the budget to what you can manage long-term.

2. Design a giveaway or activity for your most recent release—or your next one—and prep prize packages. Don't forget to include the cost of shipping in what it will cost financially to do this giveaway.

I've done giveaways with all digital prizes too, but those still cost money, time, and energy. I've done giveaways with candles and tea and paperbacks, pillows and recipe books. It's all a matter of what your readers like and will get them excited.

I've done Book Clubs on Hard releases with giveaways, and I've done scavenger hunts where everyone who enters gets a digital prize, and there are a few bigger prizes. Whatever works for you.

3. Invest in an author service like BookFunnel, StoryOrigin, Vellum, Atticus, or the like. There are any number of things that will make publishing easier, and if you have $500, get the one (or two!) you think will help you do things faster and better moving forward.

4. Find a conference, in-person or online, that addresses a weakness you've identified in your writing and sign up for it. This should be something to improve your writing, not your marketing!

5. Design a Personalized Marketing Event and book as many paid spots as you can, arrange newsletter swaps, and/or set up ads with tested targets that have converted in the past (why you do #1 above, or any of the BookBub ad training, or setting up Amazon auto ads at a low spend for a few months…) until you reach your $500 budget.

Prep it all. Set the prices. Hold your breath…watch it run!

## THE SOFT LAUNCH

### Newsletters:

- Segment into 5 – send over 5 days
- Send to unopens on Day 6
- Newsletter swaps

### Content Marketing:

- Preorder shares you've found the most effective from your Hard launches

### Paid Ads:

- Preorder group ads
- AMS / FB ads 1-2 weeks out (or longer, if at all…)

**Other:**

- Join a promotion to grow your newsletter
- Increased budget on paid ads
- Increased frequency on content marketing
- Anything that's easy for you that you like doing

**Top 5 Things To Do if you have $1000:**

1. Put Book 1 on sale for 99¢ and book the top 5 tier ads in your genre. For me, this would be Robin Reads ($85), Fussy Librarian ($35), eReader Café/Faithful Reads ($60), My Book Cave ($49), and eReader News Today (ENT) ($60). That's a total of $289, which leaves me a little over $700 for paid advertising.

This could be the Book 1 in your active, releasing series. Or a related one. Or simply a backlist title that needs some love.

2. Make a group of closely related books (could be across series of yours) into a single Amazon ad and target your bestselling series titles, ASINs, and series name. If you set a budget of $30/day, you could spend up to $600/month.

3. Run some BookBub test ads to learn who's a good target for you. You can do these with as little as $10 and 24 hours. Test 5-7 targets, with 2-3 images, and for $200, you should be able to find out which type of ad and which authors will convert for you on future ads.

I have a whole BookBub Ads Dare, so if you want more information about that, it's in the resources at the end of this book. It's free.

4. Plan a Personal Marketing Event and put Book 1 at free surrounding an anniversary, a series birthday, or a holiday. Then book as many paid newsletter ads as $1000 will buy you. Try for BookBub first, of course, and if they say no, move forward with your plan with other paid newsletter spots.

Save some of the money for an Amazon ad where you put together a group of your books and target only the book you're going to be featuring for free.

You could save some of your $1000 and do extremely tight, tested targets on Facebook for the duration of the limited-time sale.

5. Identify a backlist series that needs a facelift. See if there are some elements or tropes in the book that are selling better in the market that you could highlight more fully to fit. If so, consider recovering the series and relaunching it.

## BUDGETING FOR YOUR LAUNCH

There are only a couple of rules for budgets for any tier of launch.

Spend more on what has worked before. This is hard to do if you don't know what will work. Or you have no money.

Only spend what you can afford to lose on this launch. Remember, when you fail, you learn. So if you spend a bunch on a promotional opportunity to takeover a group and it does nothing? Learn, note it, don't do it again.

If you spend a bunch on Facebook ads and your book shoots to the Top 500? Spend more on Facebook ads next time.

In general, here's what I'm allocating to each tier of release. You do not ever have to spend this much money. You also get to decide where you spend your money. Or if you spend any at all.

Hard launch: $1000-$2000 between preorder and launch week. This can be spent on the paid advertising of your choice, paid newsletters, giveaways, etc.

In the first 30-45 days of a Hard launch book, I typically allocate an additional $5000-$6000 to put toward honed, tested ad targets for the book. If the ads don't perform as well as I'd like, I turn them down. If they're going better than anticipated, I may choose to add more money to them.

Again, a lot of this is done by feel, as well as according to my risk level and ability to pay for such ads.

Medium launch: Up to $1000 between preorder and launch week. An additional $2000-$3000 in release month. Again, the bulk of this is done in paid advertising, as I don't normally release at 99¢, so spending a bunch of money on paid newsletter spots isn't something I do for the book being launched.

That said, as noted in the Medium launch chapter, sometimes I do put an earlier book in the series (almost always Book 1) on sale and put those paid newsletter spots on that to grow readership in the series, which in turn increases the preorders for this Medium launch. That would be counted in part of the $1000 spent during the preorder and launch week.

Soft launch: Up to $500 between preorder and launch week. $1000 in release month (maybe). I put a "maybe" there, because Soft launches are supposed to be sleeping, sipping times for you. A few posts on social media. A graphic or two. A really fast, easy giveaway—again, refer to the Soft launch chapter for ideas on that—and that's about it.

But I do set up preorder auto ads on Amazon for Soft launch books, the same way I do for all of my books, so that's where the bulk of my $500 is going in preorder and launch. After the release, I might let those ads keep running, but I might not, especially for later books in the series. This depends on how intertwined the stories are, of course, so you have to look at how you write, how you structure series, and make the best decision for your advertising and marketing dollars.

## SAMPLE LAUNCH PLANS FOR A SERIES

Okay, so sometimes I do a Hard launch on Book 1 and sometimes Medium. I don't usually do Soft, but if I was new or worried about the series, I might. If it was only a trilogy, I probably would. Four books, no, I wouldn't.

So the number of books in your series makes a difference for your launch plans. This is why I usually know how many books I'm going to do in a series before I start. Not only so I can plan for those open loops and story questions that don't get answered in Book 1, 2 or 3 and draw people through to 6, 7, and 8, but so that I can plan out the launch tier for each book.

I can plan promotions, newsletter content, and social media posts. Below are a few scenarios that start with Book 1 as a Hard launch, then Medium, then Soft.

I write long series, so I went up to 6 books, and then didn't detail forever. You can figure it out past that, I think… I know you can. You're smart enough to do this!

For series less than 6 books, you adapt. In general, the last book in a series is a Hard launch, so you start there. You know that's going to be hard. You know what other books you have coming out under other names. You know the timing (I hope). You know the length of the series—though I will

say this changes for me sometimes, and then I'm sending panicked emails to my cover designer to get rush covers for the extra books, and I'm adjusting my launch system.

That's totally okay. If you don't learn anything else from this book, learn that anything you plan is fluid and flexible.

My word—two more F-words! This book is filled with them! ;)

If previous launches are exceeding expectations, don't be afraid to modify future launch plans. If previous launches in a series aren't going well, don't be afraid to modify future launch plans. Everything is fluid and flexible.

In the samples below, you'll notice that there are never 2 Hard launches back to back. Remember, this is for people who release often. If you're releasing 3-4 books a year, they can all be Hard launches.

If it's more than that, I suggest some sort of tiered plan for sanity and financial reasons.

SAMPLE HARD BOOK 1 LAUNCH PLAN:

Book 1 – Hard

Book 2 – Soft

Book 3 – Medium

Book 4 – Hard

Book 5 – Soft

Book 6 – Hard

Book 7+ - Decide based on series length – the LAST book is usually HARD.

SAMPLE MEDIUM BOOK 1 LAUNCH PLAN:

Book 1 – Medium

Book 2 – Hard

Book 3 – Soft

Book 4 – Soft

Book 5 – Hard

Book 6 – Medium

Book 7+ - Decide based on series length – the LAST book is usually HARD.

SAMPLE SOFT BOOK 1 LAUNCH PLAN:

Book 1 – Soft

Book 2 – Hard

Book 3 – Medium

Book 4 – Soft

Book 5 – Medium

Book 6 – Hard

Book 7+ - Decide based on series length – the LAST book is usually HARD.

## POST-LAUNCH

That's it, right? Nope. You now have a book, my friends, and that's an asset that NEVER dies. *Never ever.* Sometimes you have to leave it alone and let it do its thing. It might not earn millions right out of the gate. That's okay. In a year or two, when the tide shifts, you might be primed and ready for your book to rise to the top.

Keep studying the market. Be aware of what kind of story you wrote, with what tropes, what elements, what type of hero, setting, and plot points. And if you can fit current trends that crop up, you could earn more money with a different cover or title and capitalize on your lifelong asset over and over…and over.

When you're not focused on launching a book, improving your craft, planning your next amazing bestseller, emailing a cover designer, or doing any of the other 15,386 tasks a small business owner must do, you can plan backlist promotions for your books that have already been launched and are out there.

Recently, I was asked how I decide 1. If I should promote an "old" book, and 2. How I do that. Which book? Only new releases? *What, Elana, what? How, Elana how? When, Elana, when? How much, Elana, how much?*

All the questions.

I honestly don't mind the questions. So much of what I do, I've learned over many years of trial and error. Failing and moving forward. Keeping track of my data and learning from it.

Here's the one thing about backlist: *It's only old to you.* Perhaps a few superfans who've already read it. But if you're in KU, you can still do backlist sales and engage those superfans too.

So whenever someone asks me which series they should focus on, I ask them this:

Did the series sell well when it first came out?

If so proceed to the next step.

Secondly, what's the read-through?

If the series sold well when it first came out, and your read-through is stellar—you have to decide what this is. For me personally? Oh, you and your questions!—then that's a series I sink money into anytime I want.

Quite simply, it's a racehorse.

For me personally, I'm looking for a read-through from a paid Book 1 to a paid Book 2 at 60% or higher. From Book 2 to 3 at 70% or higher. From Book 3 to 4 at 85% or higher. That's telling me that readers take the first few books to learn to trust me, and then they read the whole series.

To be clear, I'd advertise those Book 1s, no matter their age, at full price. Racehorses get big money, and they earn big money at full price.

Donkeys? Backlist donkeys get promotions, not continual ad spend. That's how I divide them up.

So depending on the size of your backlist, you can start to do some promotional things on a semi-regular basis. A couple of years ago, I decided to do "Weekend Deals." These are free or 99¢ books at any spot in a series (not just Book 1) that go out *only* to newsletter subscribers on select Fridays.

There's a couple of tips and tricks to something like this.

1. Never make it a regular feature. Your readers should never know when the deal will land in their inbox. The goal is to get people on your newsletter and give them valuable content they want to open and read.

The purpose of this is to get two-thirds of your newsletter subscribers to become like the other one-third—superfans. But you can't forget about them either! It's such a tricky balancing act we're doing.

So this is why I do the sales, and to be clear, I do these on my donkeys about 85.8% of the time. Rarely do I put my racehorses in these Weekend Deals. If I do, it's because they got a BookBub Featured Deal, or the promo is centered around a new release in that series, or I've orchestrated a huge Personal Marketing Event (PME) surrounding a holiday or other date on the calendar that my books fit right into seamlessly.

I talked a ton about these PME's in Writing and Marketing Systems, so I'm not going to go into them in this book. If you've forgotten what those are, go check out that book.

Anyway, I do the sales to 1. Warm up lukewarm fans on my newsletter list, and 2. To get new-to-me readers picking up the books, reading them, and joining the newsletter.

For superfans (the third type of reader you have), I remind them to get the book into their permanent library, as I have a huge amount of readers who read in Kindle Unlimited. That's a lending program, and readers don't actually own the book. So during a free or 99¢ sale, I remind them of this gently and encourage them to buy the book so they can read it any old time they want.

At the same time, I thank them for reading it already, and ask them to leave a review if they haven't done that yet. So I'm talking to all 3 levels of reader on my newsletter when I tell them about my Weekend Deals.

2. Do different kinds of sales. A Weekend Deal does great for me, and I run it from Friday – Sunday. Most of the time. Sometimes a one-day deal is awesome too, and those can be run any day of the week. Might I suggest

you look at your data for the day of the week you sell the least, and do it then?

For me that would be a Tuesday – Thursday. I don't know what it is for you. You have to look to know.

Alternately, you can choose the day of the week that is the best for you, and do a one-day deal there too. Sometimes it's nice to go, "Holy strawberry shakes with whipped cream. I made a *lot* today!"

Then we can smile for days.

You can do something like a Throwback Thursday, and send out an old-only-to-you book to your newsletter, book a big ad, whatever. If you did this once a month, could you fill a year with promos? Remember, don't do it on the same Thursday every month! Vary it up. Make your readers eagerly open every email to see if they'll get something amazing at a discounted price that day.

You can do boxed sets and run a huge deal on those. *Boxed set blowout deal! Billionaire weekend reads! Start a series for half price! Five books for a buck!*

I don't care what you call it.

If you have bundles or boxed sets, can you put one on sale in every month? Or even every quarter? Book the biggest ad you can afford (see my lists in the above chapters), send it to your newsletter, post some content on social media, and perhaps run some paid ads.

3. If your automation sequence doesn't include your entire backlist, I'm going to suggest you do so. People are afraid of long drip campaigns, but I don't do anything out of fear. You don't anymore, either, right? Mm-hm. Keep working on that!

My goal is to make my newsletter subscribers love me or leave me. After all, I'm paying for them to be on the list. If they don't want to know about me and my books, they can tap on unsubscribe.

I talk a lot about my automation sequence in Writing and Marketing Systems, so again, I'm not going to delve into it here. But by doing select, limited-time sales, utilizing your newsletter and paid newsletter ads, perhaps swaps, and more, you can keep your books selling all the time.

All right, I promised myself I wouldn't go into this big, long section about promotions and stuff! I have other books on this. I have a Promotion Playbook in the Indie Inspiration group on Facebook.

I did want to backtrack quickly to the read-through. I only touched on paid read-through. If you're utilizing permafree books on all platforms, you might find a different read-through per platform.

In general, I'm looking for a 5% read-through from a free Book 1 to a paid Book 2. Then the percentages are the same as the paid read-through I mentioned above.

Industry standard for read-through for a free Book 1 to a paid Book 2 is closer to 2-3%. So I'm looking for a slightly higher percentage before I start pouring big money into a permafree.

To me, a permafree strategy is a low-and-slow strategy anyway, and it's probably not where I'm going to sink my racehorse money.

It's time to go plan your next amazing book, whether that means you find an amazing class to take or a webinar (not on marketing!) that will take your storytelling to the next level. If you're ready for planning a launch, go do that!

Good luck out there!

## THE END OF THE ROAD

Well, that's it for us and our time together. I hope you've seen a few things that can help you take your writing, packaging and launching (and backlist promotions!) to a new level.

**Resources:**

- Writing and Marketing Systems by Elana M. Johnson: https://books2read.com/MarketingSystems
- Promotion Playbook on Indie Inspiration: https://www.facebook.com/groups/IndieInspiration/learning_content/?filter=942217699913178
- A sample Weekend Deal email: https://preview.mailerlite.com/v1n1b6
- Elana's BookBub Ads Dare: http://elanajohnson.com/bookbubadsdare
- Remember, all of the above will be on my website: http://elanajohnson.com/launchingbestseller

## RESOURCES

You can find everything mentioned as a resource in this book on my website: http://elanajohnson.com/launchingbestseller

# ABOUT ELANA

Elana M. Johnson is the force behind Indie Inspiration, both a series of books as well as a group of like-minded authors looking to level up through inspiring others to find their own path in Indie Publishing without fear. Join the Indie Inspiration Group on Facebook.

Join the Indie Inspiration with Elana Johnson newsletter here.

If you liked this book, please take a few minutes to **leave a review for it**. Authors (Elana included!) really appreciate this, and it helps draw more readers to books they might like. Thanks!

**WRITING AND LAUNCHING A BESTSELLER**

Book Four in the Indie Inspiration series

by Elana M. Johnson

Copyright © 2021 by Elana Johnson

Published by AEJ Creative Works

All Rights Reserved

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without the express written permission of the author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in, or encourage, the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Cover by Steven Novak, http://www.novakillustration.com/

Interior Design by AEJ Creative Works